

TO WORLDS BEYOND

Robert Silverberg

ISAAC ASIMOV introduces ROBERT SILVERBERG:



SPHERE SCIENCE FICTION

"If there is one thing I like to do, it is to beam condescendingly down upon bright young authors who enter my field; that is, science fiction. There is something delightful about unbending from my awesome height as established master in the genre (I am Isaac Asimov, by the way, if you haven't already guessed) to encourage some eager young person who has set his shaky foot upon the path I have myself trod so sure-footedly and so far.

I was all set to do this to young Robert Silverberg when he began to publish science fiction stories in the middle 1950's. I prepared my little speech, one that was not too awe-inspiring, of course, but yet with just a touch of necessary dignity, and was set.

And then what do you suppose the miserable ungrateful creature went and did? He zoomed upward at rocket velocities!

I was just bending down to pat him on the head when he whizzed by and nearly took the skin off my nose. When I leaned back and looked upward, there was Robert Silverberg—a first-magnitude star in the science fiction heavens. He went from mere fan to bigtime writer in exactly zero time."

ROBERT SILVERBERG introduces himself with 9 first rate original stories. As Isaac Asimov says: "You might as well read them, the rat writes excellent stories."

*Also by Robert Silverberg and available in Sphere Books
at the end of 1969*

TO OPEN THE SKY

TO WORLDS BEYOND

For Lester and Evelyn del Rey

To Worlds Beyond

ROBERT SILVERBERG



SPHERE BOOKS

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ABOUT ROBERT SILVERBERG

by Isaac Asimov

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Inside of two months, people were saying to me, "Keep at it, Asimov, and you, too, will be a Robert Silverberg some day." (I killed them, of course, every one of them.)

But that's all right. You may think that I pass by such things, but I don't. Within me the canker of ever-aborted revenge gnaws and snarls. I shall not forget. Someday—mark my words, someday—perhaps not tomorrow, but someday—the time will come when he will want me to pat his head and say a patronizing word.

AND I WON'T!

As if this were not enough, young Robert adds to his vicious behavior by being exactly what every writer would like to be.

Consider! He is dark, handsome and slim, with somber, deep-set, burning eyes that seem to probe under skin and muscle and to bare your very soul with a skillful scalpel. I have seen girls

shiver with ecstasy under that white-hot look, bestowed for but one moment though it may be, and then drawn carelessly away.

I, myself, am, of course, unaffected, but when he looks at me I hastily button my jacket.

Then, too, he is bearded; not with offensive profusion, but with neat literary flair. It gives him an almost satanic appearance. I have seen girls shiver—No, I said that already. (Of *course* I'm jealous. I am incredibly handsome, but it is a clean-cut, open-faced, honestly frank handsomeness with nothing satanic about it so that I tend to inspire very sisterly feelings in the female heart.)

And on top of that, his conversation is not frivolous. Not for him the tossed-off quip that, like a stiletto, buries itself almost unfelt in the heart. From him, rather, the stately machete of a riposte, that efficiently, and without undue haste, strips your skin from head to toe.

Surely, the cup of his iniquity is full!

Not at all. What kind of wife do you think a writer of this type ought to have? A shrew who will give him the comeuppance he so richly deserves, naturally!

Well, it doesn't work that way. Barbara Silverberg is a sweet, gentle, very pretty girl who caters adoringly to Robert's every whim and who belies her appearance by being indecently brainy. She is, in point of fact, an engineer.

Naturally, I have frequently tried to get her alone in order to discuss some fine point of engineering that I need straightened out for some of my more technical writings.

You would think young Robert would understand the requirements of research. And yet, although to all outward appearances he is far too satanic and other-worldly to take note of such things, he is forever, by some odd chance, standing between Barbara and myself.

I think that is his very worst characteristic—he simply has no tact!

It would serve him quite right if you refused to read this book—but go ahead and read it anyway. You might as well. The rat writes excellent stories.

Isaac Asimov

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INTRODUCTION

We are living in the age of space. It began officially on an electrifying day in October, 1957, when the first Soviet sputnik soared into orbit. On that day, one segment of science fiction's realm was lopped away and thrust into the world of everyday fact. Today, the launching of new space satellites is a routine matter rarely deemed worth the front pages. Rockets from Earth have already landed on the Moon. Probes have gone forth to Mars and Venus. In only a handful of years men will walk through lunar dust, and in a matter of decades they will stand on the red plains of Mars.

Each new feat of our space scientists encroaches on the world of science fiction. Even so, that domain remains infinite—for science-fictioneers have all of time and space at their command. We can no longer write fiction about the launching of the first space satellites, and soon it will be impossible to envision in fiction the first manned trip to the Moon. But what of that? A man's biography does not end with his first few faltering steps. The giant strides of later years are our concern.

In science fiction, we can look beyond today's sputtering rockets to a glittering skein of tomorrows. Men will reach the Moon, yes, and Mars and Venus too, and they will surge outward to far Pluto and then to the stars. But it will take time. Centuries may pass before other solar systems see their first visitors from Earth.

So there is still room for some creative dreaming about the remoter regions of the galaxy. The headlines of the past few years have not robbed science fiction of its scope. The universe is opening to us, but we have much of the journey yet to travel—and in the time of waiting we can divert ourselves with imagined visions of how it will be.

Here are nine stories of science fiction, then. Nine possible tomorrows, nine ventures into the unknown—nine voyages to worlds beyond.

Robert Silverberg

THE OLD MAN

In the very near future, when space flight becomes a routine job like the commercial aviation of today, a new breed of spacemen may appear. They'll be called on to perform the toughest job in the world. Unlike John Glenn, Yuri Gagarin, and the rest of our spacemen so far, tomorrow's rocket pilots will not merely be sitting passively inside a capsule while it hurtles through a fixed orbit. They'll be at the controls of vehicles moving at unimaginable speeds across vast distances in complex trajectories. It'll take a very special kind of man to pilot those ships—and such men may have certain very special problems.

The Old Man came down the ramp of the spaceship and stood at the edge of the landing field, just looking around. It was good to see Earth again. For a quarter of his lifetime, he'd seen Earth only in snatches, between space trips.

He stood there, one hand on the cold metal of the ship's catwalk, and looked at the field. It had been a night flight in from Callisto, and the field was brightly lit, sparkling sodium lamps and glittering constellations of guide-beams to illuminate the landing strip for pilots coming down. Bright light was necessary. It was a split-second job, landing a spaceship, calling for devilishly good reflexes. The Old Man looked at his own unshaking hands, and smiled proudly.

Then he picked up his duffel and started to walk across the field.

After about four steps, a gray-clad figure stepped out from behind a dolly and grinned at him.

"Hello there, Carter!"

"Hello there," the Old Man said amiably. But the blankness on his face told the other that the Old Man did not remember him.

"I'm Selwyn—Jim Selwyn. Remember now?"

A smile crossed the Old Man's space-tanned, strain-lined face. "Sure I do—Lieutenant."

"Not any more," Selwyn said, shaking his head. "I'm retired."

"Oh," the Old Man said.

He remembered Selwyn from the far-off past of his trainee days. Lieutenant James Selwyn had been one of the big men of the Space Patrol, and he had paid a visit to the Academy to talk to the new recruits—one of whom had been the Old Man. The Old Man blushed a little for his younger self, as he remembered the blunt idol-worship with which he had approached Selwyn then.

And here was Selwyn now. Retired. A has-been.

"What! are you doing these days?" the Old Man asked.

"Ground Mech. Can't get the feel of rockets out of my system, I guess. They retired me after one of my flights on the Pluto run. Guess I slowed down taking the turnover curve, or something. It's a good thing they spotted me before I had an accident."

"Yeah," the Old Man said. "Good thing. You got to have real good eyes to stay behind one of those big crates. Eyes and hands. The second your reflexes start to go, you gotta come out." Suddenly he glanced inquisitively at Selwyn. "Hey, Selwyn, tell me something."

"What?"

"You're not bitter about getting bounced—getting retired, are you? I mean, it doesn't kill you to look at the ships going out and leaving you here?"

Selwyn chuckled. "Hell, no! Not any more. I kicked like hell when I first got my notice, but it wore off. I miss it, a little—but I know my time was up when they yanked me. You remember Les Huddleston, don't you?"

The Old Man nodded grimly. Huddleston was one of the few who managed to fool them. He'd lasted past the usual retirement age, bluffed his way—until the day he was taking up the Mars ship, and didn't quite have it. He was only a fifth of a second off in his coordination, but it cost a hundred lives and fifty million dollars. They kept an eye out for the Huddlestons, now.

"Have a good trip?" Selwyn asked.

The Old Man nodded. "Pretty good. I did the Callisto run. It's all frozen and blue ice out there. Not much to see."

For some reason, Selwyn's eyes looked misty. "Yeah. Not much to see. Just blue ice."

"That's all. But I made the trip okay. I'm due to take out the Neptune run this time around. Pretty good job."

"Neptune's an interesting place," Selwyn said, leaning on the dolly. "Venus was always my favorite, though. It's got—"

Suddenly there was a crackle and the field PA system came to life. "*Flight Lieutenant Carter, please report to Administration Building at once. Flight Lieutenant Carter, please report to Administration Building at once. Thank you.*"

"That's me," the Old Man said. "Guess I gotta go. They probably want to give me my new assignment, and they've got my paycheck for me. Pretty good paycheck, too."

Selwyn smiled and clapped the Old Man on the arm. "Good luck, Carter. Give 'em hell."

"Don't worry about me," the Old Man said. He picked up his duffel and started walking across the field to the big gleaming frosty white dome of the Administration Building.

He passed a couple of other pilots on the way—green kids, right out of the academy, without the knowing look and air of confidence that there was about a veteran pilot. They were running springily someplace, perhaps just working off excess energy before their next trip up—or before their first trip up.

"Hey there, Old Man!" they yelled, as they ran by. "How's things, Lieutenant?"

"Can't complain," the Old Man said, and kept walking.

He thought of Selwyn again. So that was what it was like to be washed up? You hung around the spacefield, pushing a dolly, tinkering with feedlines and hauling fuel, grateful to be allowed to smell spaceships and feel the rumble of takeoffs after your time was up. You watched the pilots who still had the eyes and the hands, and envied them.

The Old Man shook his head bitterly. It was sometimes a lousy business, running spaceships. The tests, for one thing. A test before you took off, a test when you landed. They gave him a test of Callisto, and they'd give him another one when he was ready to take out the Neptune run. They kept watch on you, all right.

"Hello, Lieutenant Carter. Have a good trip?"

It was Halvorsen, Base Medic. "Did all right, Doc. Nothing to gripe about."

"Be in to see me for a checkup soon, Lieutenant?"

"Soon enough," the Old Man said. "I'm taking the Neptune run, I hear." He grinned and kept walking.

After a few minutes more he was at the door to the Administration Building, and the plastic door swung open as he

walked up to it. A crisp-looking, efficient secretary came forward and flashed a row of white teeth at him.

"Good evening, Lieutenant Carter. Commander Jacobs would like to see you as soon as possible, Lieutenant."

"Tell him I'll be right in," the Old Man said. He walked over to the water cooler, took a long slug—he couldn't risk drinking anything stronger, for fear of damaging his pilot's reflexes—and headed for the panelled door that said on it D. L. JACOBS, Base Commander.

The Old Man paused for just a moment, adjusting his flight jacket, straightening his tie, squaring his shoulders. Then he rapped on the door.

"Yes?"

"Lieutenant Carter to see you, sir."

"Come right in, Lieutenant!"

The Old Man pushed open the door and walked in. Commander Jacobs stood stiffly behind his desk, looking very military and stern. The Old Man's arm snapped up in a crisp salute, which the Commander returned.

"Have a seat, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir." The Old Man pulled out a chair and glanced expectantly at Jacobs. Jacobs was an old spaceman himself, the Old Man knew. He wondered how come Selwyn had become a rocket mech and Jacobs a Base Commander, and then decided neither job was worth a damn next to that of being a space pilot.

Commander Jacobs fumbled in his desk drawer, took out a long brown envelope. At the sight of his paycheck, the Old Man grinned.

"How was your trip, Lieutenant?"

"Not bad at all, sir. I'll be filing the log later. It was a good trip, though."

"They *have* to be good trips, Lieutenant. Anything less is disastrous. You know that, of course."

"Of course, sir."

The Commander scowled and handed the Old Man the pay envelope. "Here's your pay for the flight just concluded, Lieutenant."

The Old Man took the envelope, slid it into his breast pocket, and looked up. The next item on the agenda was usually the flight assignment. Those came in thick green envelopes.

But Commander Jacobs shook his head. "Please open the

pay envelope, Lieutenant. I want to make sure you read it now."

The Old Man frowned. "The pay computers haven't made a mistake yet, sir. I'd be willing to bet—"

"Open the envelope, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

The Old Man ran a fingertip down the envelope, opened it, took out its contents. There was a neat blue check in there, and he put that aside. He looked at the amount briefly, then whistled.

Then he read the accompanying voucher.

"Carter, Lieutenant Raymond F.

"For Callisto tour, round-trip, at usual rates: \$7,431.62.

"Severance pay, \$10,000.

"Total, \$17,431.62."

Numb, the Old Man looked up. "*Severance pay?*" His voice was a harsh puzzled whisper. "But that means I'm—I'm—"

Commander Jacobs nodded. "I'm afraid so. That test you took at Callisto—"

"But I passed that!"

"I know. But the indications are that you'd have failed the next one, Lieutenant. We're just avoiding an unpleasant and inevitable scene."

"So you're throwing me out?" the Old Man asked. The world seemed to spin around him. He should have expected it, but he hadn't.

"We're retiring you," Jacobs corrected.

"I still have some time left, though! Can't you let me take the one more flight to Neptune?"

"You're not a good risk," the Commander said bluntly. "Look here, Carter—you know that a pilot must be right up to peak, and nothing less than perfection will do. Well, you're not perfect any more. It happens to all of us."

"I'm still young, though."

"Young?" Jacobs smiled. "Young? Nonsense, Carter. You're a veteran. They call you the Old Man, don't they? Look at those wrinkles around your eyes! You're *ancient*, as space pilots go. You're ready for the scrapheap. And I'm afraid we have to let you go. But there'll always be room for you here, some sort of ground job."

The Old Man swallowed hard, fighting to keep back the tears. The thought of Jim Selwyn struck him, and he knew he was

like all the rest. There was no place in space travel for old men. You had to be young and fresh with trigger reflexes.

"Okay—sir," he said hoarsely. "I won't fight any. I'll come around in a couple of days and talk over a ground job with you. When I'm feeling better."

"That's wise of you, Lieutenant. I'm glad you understand."

"Sure. Sure, I understand," the Old Man said. He picked up the paycheck and slid it into his pocket, saluted limply, and turned away. He walked outside, looking at the row of gleaming ships that sat there ready to spring toward the stars.

Not for me, he thought. Not any more.

But he admitted to himself that Jacobs was right. Those last few flights had been pretty shaky, though he tried to deny it.

There was no sense hiding the fact any more. He waved to Jim Selwyn, and started to walk toward him to tell him the news.

It was too bad, but it made sense. He was old, as space pilots went, and couldn't expect anything else but this. It had to happen some time. He was *ancient*, in fact.

Why, he was nearly twenty.

NEW MEN FOR MARS

Men will get to Mars before the end of the present century, unless I miss my guess. They won't find it a pleasant place. The air is thin, the weather is cold, and there's not a drop of water in sight. But men will try to carve a foothold there, just as they've done in the frozen wastes of Antarctica and the dismal barrenness of the Sahara. How will they colonize Mars, though? By building self-containing pockets of earth in which men can huddle? Perhaps it'll be done by changing the men to fit the planet, instead.

The interplanetary ferry *Bernadotte* quivered in space and began the long, slow turnover motion that was bringing it inexorably closer to the cold, slumbering, oxidized wastes of Mars. Aboard the ship, UN man Michael Aherne, making his first trip to the red planet, stared anxiously through the rear viewer, searching for some sign of life.

There was none. The Dome that housed the Mars Colony was not in sight, and all Aherne could see was the bleak, barren sand. He was nervous—as, indeed, a spy whose ostensibly secret mission was known openly to everyone should be. He had been pitchforked into a nasty job, and he knew a stern test lay ahead of him.

Aherne heard a noise somewhere in the back of the cabin and whirled to see the captain of the little vessel enter—Juri Valoinen, a tall, balding, annoyingly banteresome Finn who had logged more hours in space than any other living man.

"Just another hundred minutes or so," Valoinen told him. "You ought to be able to see our Dome pretty soon—we'll be coming down right next to it, practically. I'm always afraid we're going to land right *on* it one of these days, and that'll shoot the UN budget completely to blazes."

Aherne forced himself to grin, and turned away from the viewer to walk toward the captain. Aherne was a man of middle height, stocky, sandy-haired; as Special Attaché-at-Large for the United Nations, he had been on a number of far-flung investigations, but this was about as far as he had ever been flung

in the name of the UN—forty million miles, across the gulf of space—to spy on the Mars Colony. *Spy.*

Some spy, he thought bitterly.

He looked at his watch. They were right on schedule.

"They know I'm coming, don't they?" Aherne asked.

The Finn nodded, smiling knowingly. "Indeed they do. And what's more, they know *why* you're coming. I don't doubt they'll have the plush carpet rolled out for you for sure. They're going to want to make a good impression on you."

"That's what I was afraid of," said Aherne. "I'd have preferred to go among them cold and take a look around. That way my report would be genuine."

"Who needs genuine reports?" Valoinen demanded sardonically. "My friend, it's time you learned that our organization thrives on misconception and blunder. Facts are its deadly enemies."

Instantly Aherne's face darkened. "Let's not be flippant, Valoinen. The UN is responsible for a good many things we ought to be thankful for—including the preservation of your own insignificant country," he snapped. "Not to mention the handsome salary you get for ferrying this boat back and forth between Mars and Earth."

The space captain backed off, holding up a hand to check the flow of Aherne's anger. "Take it easy, son, I think it's a wonderful organization too. But I'm old enough not to take it as seriously as all that."

"Well, maybe when you're even a little older you'll learn that the UN *has* to be taken seriously," Aherne grunted, and turned his attention back to the viewer. He narrowed his eyes, staring into the blackness at the dim coppery globe half-visible below.

After a moment he turned once again; Valoinen was still standing behind him, arms folded, thin lips twisted in a wry grin. "Well?"

"I think I see the Dome," Aherne said.

"I congratulate you."

"No, don't joke." Aherne frowned, glanced back for a moment to verify what he had seen, and scratched his head. "But—why are there *two* domes? There seems to be another one, about ten miles from the first. How come? I'm sure the UN only built one."

Valoinen showed white, even teeth in a derisive smile. "Exactly right, my friend. Only one of those is the UN dome."

"But the other?"

"You'll find out soon enough. I don't want to—ah—prejudice you. I want your report to be—ah—*genuine*." He spun on his heel and moved towards the door. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I'll have to tend to my cargo."

The bulkhead door clanged closed, and Aherne was left alone—staring out in bewilderment at the twin domes.

II

"Put the gyroscopes over there," Valoinen ordered, and three members of his crew hove to, dragging the crates to the designated spot.

"There—that finishes it," the captain said. The cargo crates were arranged in a neat semicircle outside the ship, awaiting pickup. Valoinen glanced over at Aherne, who was standing idly to one side. Aherne was feeling exceedingly uncomfortable, partly because he was bundled up in the unfamiliar bulkiness of a spacesuit and partly because he had had nothing at all to do during the unloading.

"You all right, Aherne?"

The UN man nodded, moving the helmet of his suit stiffly up and down. "Just fine," he said. The portable air generator was a dead weight hanging down his back, seemingly at the point of ripping his deltoid muscles out bodily. He felt anything but fine, though he had no intention of telling the captain that.

"They'll be here to get you any minute," said Valoinen. "I've radioed the colony that there's a cargo pickup, and they're sending a fleet of sandcrawlers out. They said they're very anxious to meet you."

Aherne tensed. It was going to be a difficult, tricky mission. Sent here to determine if the tremendous expense necessary for continuance of the Mars Colony was justified by the results produced so far, Aherne was going to have to remain dispassionate, aloof to the very last. He was here to pass a sentence of life or death on the Colony.

The UN would rely on his report. They always did. Aherne had proved his impartiality time and again. He knew just one loyalty: to the corporate, many-headed creature known as the

United Nations. A second-generation UN man, Aherne was the ideal observer.

But yet he hoped the colonists wouldn't make his task any more difficult than it already was. Aherne recognized the fact that he had a considerable natural sympathy for the Martian pioneers, a personal desire to see the Colony continue and prosper. It was part of his deepest body of beliefs that man should go out, conquer the other planets.

Still—if the Colony were inefficient, badly directed, poorly designed, it would be Aherne's duty to report it. If the Colony were barely clinging to survival, if further progress seemed completely out of the question, Aherne would have to say that too—and, so saying, kill the Colony.

He hoped the colonists would not play on his sympathies and urge him to whitewash any of their deficiencies; it would set up a painful inner conflict in him. He could not falsify his report—but he was anxious to see the Colony survive at all costs.

And a man like Aherne—monolithic, unswervingly loyal, firm in his beliefs—would fall apart completely in a situation of immediate inner stress of that sort. Aherne knew that—and, as the low-slung fleet of sandcrawlers purred along the desert toward him, he felt a tiny pulse of fear starting to thud in his chest.

He watched the steady approach of the crawlers. The air was cold and clear—his suit-thermometer, embedded in the heel of his left glove, showed a comparatively mild temperature of minus twenty-two centigrade, and the external-pressure needle was wavering at about six pounds per square inch; internal pressure, he noted reassuringly, was maintained at a comfortable sea-level fifteen pounds.

Valoinen and his men were sitting on the unpacked crates, waiting patiently. Aherne walked over to join them.

"The Dome's out that way," Valoinen told him, pointing in the direction from which the crawlers were coming. An up-thrust, jagged range of dark mountains cut off vision about four miles in the distance. "Behind those hills," Valoinen said. "The Dome's right back there."

"And the other one?"

"That's a little further on," said Valoinen.

They fell silent—Aherne felt unwilling to prod for informa-

tion about the second dome—and waited for the colonists to arrive. The sun, a sickly, pale green object, was high overhead, and the tailstanding *Bernadotte* cast a long, straggling shadow over the leveled, heat-fused sand of the landing clearing.

The crawlers were getting larger now, and Aherne could make them out clearly. They were long, ground-hugging vehicles with caterpillar treads spread out over a lengthwise grid, with room for a couple of passengers in a plastic bubble up front, and a cargo hold aft. There were six of them, rocking gently from side to side as they undulated through the shifting red sand.

Aherne could hear the grating, feathery sound of their treads sliding over the sand toward him. At length, the convoy breasted the final dune and pulled up in front of the *Bernadotte*.

A figure dropped lightly from the leading crawler and trotted toward them. Aherne could just barely see the man's face behind his helmet—blonde hair swept back over a high forehead, and piercing blue eyes. His body, concealed by the spacesuit, seemed long and rangy.

"I'm Sully Roberts," he announced. "Hello, skipper."

"Here's your cargo, Sully." Valoinen stretched forth his arm in an expansive gesture, holding out a sheaf of invoices.

Roberts reached out and took the invoices, carefully avoiding looking at Aherne. The colonist riffled quickly through them.

"Hmm. Well, at least the externals match. I can't guarantee that you've actually got gyros in those boxes, and not toy teddy bears, but it won't do to open 'em now, I guess."

"Don't you trust me?" Valoinen asked sharply.

"Sure I do," said Roberts. "But this is the UN's money we're spending, and we don't want to waste any of it. We have to be very careful with our appropriation, of course."

"Of course," said the captain lightly.

That was for my benefit, Aherne thought. *They're so terribly anxious to show me what good little boys they are.*

"Oh," Valoinen said. "Silly of me—I clean forgot to introduce you. Sully, this is Michael Aherne of the United Nations. He's come to stay with you for a while."

Roberts took a couple of steps forward and shook Aherne's hand. "How d'ye do! I'm Sullivan Roberts, District Overchief for the Colony. I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Aherne, and I hope to be seeing a lot of you while you're here."

"Glad to meet you, Roberts."

Roberts waved an arm and his men dismounted from their crawlers. Assisted by Valoinen's crew, they quickly loaded the crates into the cargo holds.

"You can ride with me, Mr. Aherne," Roberts said.

"Fine." Aherne clambered up into the fore bubble of the sandcrawler, and Roberts got in beside him. Slowly, without any perceptible gradation between motionless and motion, the crawler began to move.

Aherne saw Valoinen grin and wave as he pulled out. Then, as the crawler started to surmount the hill, Valoinen climbed the catwalk of the *Bernadotte* and disappeared inside. His men followed, carrying the mail pouches from the Mars Colony, and the lock of the small ship slowly closed.

Aherne was on his own now, with no contacts with Earth. He was here, and he had a job to do.

III

The shining surface of the Dome loomed up before them like a yellow bubble extruded from the desert. Within the gleaming, high-arched curve of plastic, Aherne could make out a dim but busy world of buildings and people. The Dome rose to a peak height of nearly five hundred feet. Within, the artificial atmosphere was warm and breathable; outside, the cold, nitrogenous air of Mars offered little to Terran lungs.

"We go in this way," Roberts said, pointing to an airlock at the base of the Dome. The lock opened at the approach of the sandcrawler, and they rode in. The other crawlers followed. The lock swung slowly shut behind the last one. Air came hissing in.

At Roberts' signal, Aherne got down from the cab of the crawler and stretched his legs. The journey across the sand had been slow and racking. The crawler had spun through the desert like a refractory camel, and Aherne found himself woozy at the end of the ride. Still, he admitted, it was the only practical way of covering that sort of terrain.

He saw busy, efficient-looking men bustling around the crawlers, unpacking the cargo holds, carrying the crates through the lock inside. Following Roberts, Aherne moved through the inner door.

Mars Colony was spread out before him.

Aherne felt a warm sensation of pride, of admiration, run through him, but he squelched it. It was a forbidden emotion; much as he admired the hardy men and women who had erected this dome and built a city on inhospitable Mars, he was here as their judge now and would have to put those feelings aside.

"There's a committee waiting to see you," Roberts said. "We've been looking forward to your visit ever since we found out you were coming."

"Lead on," Aherne told him.

The committee was assembled in a squat, unfancy corrugated-steel hut located at a crossroad near the center of the Colony. Most of the buildings, Aherne noticed, were constructed of this cheap, unattractive material. The accent was on economy in Mars Colony, not esthetic appeal.

The committee consisted of six. Sully Roberts introduced them hurriedly.

There were three District Overchiefs present, Roberts being the fourth. Aherne shook hands with them in turn—Martelli from the North Quadrant, Richardson from the East, Fournier from the West. Roberts represented the Southern sector of the Colony. Judging from their names and physical appearances, Aherne concluded that they each represented, not only a geographical district of the Colony, but one of the major population blocs as well. For the Colony, despite all talk of assimilation, was very much the product of a group of loosely federated nations, rather than a unified world. Each country, clinging to the last remnants of its sovereignty, had insisted on representation in the Colony, and so Mars was populated by a curious racial hodgepodge which only the passage of time and the succession of generations would efface.

If, Aherne thought, there *were* any succeeding generations on Mars.

The fifth member of the committee was Dr. Raymond Carter, General Coordinator of the Colony—a forty-ish, bespectacled man whose name had been in the headlines often before the Colony had actually been planted, five years before. He had been the guiding spirit in the long crusade to build the Colony on Mars.

The sixth was Katherine Greer, introduced as a delegate-at-large, chosen by popular vote of the colonists to serve on the

welcoming committee. She was a young, slender girl in her middle twenties.

"Well, Mr. Aherne," Carter said—and the tone of his voice was unmistakable—"what do you think of the progress we've made?"

Aherne paced edgily up and back in the little room, darting nervous glances at the six colonists who hung, poised, on every word.

"I'd prefer to reserve judgment on such a sweeping statement, Dr. Carter. After all, it's to determine the extent of your progress that I'm here—and I'd rather not be required to state my final conclusions ten minutes after my arrival."

"Of course not," Carter said hastily. "I didn't mean to imply—"

"Don't worry about it." Aherne was surprised and relieved to find that these people were, if possible, even more tense than he. They were desperately anxious to make a good impression on him.

"We've arranged for your quarters to be set up in my district," said Richardson, the East District Overchief. Richardson was a slim, lithe Negro whose precise British accent hinted at an African ancestry.

"Fine," Aherne said.

"I suppose you'd like to rest for a while now," Dr. Carter continued. "You must have had a long, trying trip."

"Excellent idea. I am pretty beat."

"Mr. Richardson will conduct you to your quarters, and your meals will be taken care of. We've made considerable strides in developing synthetics—until the Martian soil is sufficiently re-nitrogenized to be capable of harboring vegetables, of course."

"Of course," Aherne said wearily. He foresaw several weeks of uneasy verbal fencing, and decided that the eagerness of these colonists to impress him was going to become tiring.

"After you've rested," Carter said, "we've scheduled a tour of the Colony for you. Miss Greer has been assigned to you as your guide."

At the mention of her name, the girl smiled slightly, and Aherne couldn't resist a grin. These colonists weren't missing an opportunity. What better way to make a favorable impression than to see to it that a nubile young wench served as his guide? Score another point for Carter and company.

He glanced at Miss Greer. She was dressed in the utilitarian, unattractive singleton tunic that all the colonists seemed to adopt, but her face was bright-eyed and interesting, and beneath the shapeless garment Aherne's critical eye detected what probably was a much more than passable figure.

He felt himself relax. This survey trip wasn't going to be as much of an ordeal for his conscience as he had been expecting.

His room was comfortable, if hardly luxurious, and he made himself at home immediately. He noticed several Colony tunics hanging in the clothes closet, and he stripped his rumpled business suit off and slid easily into one of the soft, clinging uniforms.

And then, just as he was beginning to loosen, to wriggle out of the tensions that had gripped him since the Security Council had given him the assignment, he remembered the other dome.

What was it? Who had built it? Everyone connected with the Colony here carefully avoided all mention of it, as if it were something shameful, something to hide from sight.

Aherne knew that he'd have to find out all the details before he committed himself on any final decision about Mars Colony. No matter how promising the Colony seemed, and no matter how many Miss Greers they threw in his way, he'd have to be in control of every information-factor before he could allow himself to file his report.

The colonists had given him a pleasant room, with a soft-looking bed and attractive furnishings. There was a bookcase, in which half a dozen scarlet-bound volumes leaned at an angle against one wall, and when he drew the first out he saw it was a novel by a colonist, published there in the Colony.

They don't miss a bet, he thought, feeling another forbidden tingle of pride go through him. It wouldn't be hard to recommend continuation of a colony that showed such enterprise and such drive—provided everything else held up. So far, so good.

Aherne slept soundly that night for the first time in weeks.

IV

He expected the guided tour first thing in the morning—in fact, was positively looking forward to it. And so, when he heard a soft, gentle rapping at his door the next morning, he

rolled out of bed and tried to look wide awake. He was almost positive that it was Miss Greer at the door.

He was wrong. He threw the door open and was confronted by a small, swarthy, almost copper-colored man, with deep-set eyes and jet-black hair.

"Good morning, *señor*," the stranger said blandly.

"Good morning," Aherne replied, somewhat taken aback.

"I have been sent to get you," the small man said. Aherne noticed, as the other stepped into the room, that he had an enormous barrel of a chest—the chest of a six-footer, not a man barely five-two in height. He spoke with a distinct Spanish accent.

"To get me?"

"*Si*. Please come quickly."

Too puzzled to protest, Aherne washed up, dressed—the colonial plumbing, he noted, was none too good—and followed the small man out onto the street. It was still early in the morning and few of the colonists were to be seen.

"Where are we going?" Aherne asked.

"With me," the other said noncommittally.

Aherne wondered vaguely just where he was being taken, but decided to follow without argument. It was just possible that he might find out something about the Colony that he might not learn from the official guided tour. He patted the cold butt of the Webley blaster, nestling safely in its shoulder-holster. He could hold his own with that, in case of trouble.

The little man seemed to be in a considerable hurry. He led Aherne speedily through the streets toward the outer edge of the Dome—toward the airlock.

Several of the colonists he passed on his way smiled at him, but no one seemed to want to stop him, to find out where he was going. It was just as well, Aherne thought.

They came to the airlock. Aherne saw a sandcrawler parked outside. The little man had not said a word during the entire walk. Now he indicated a rack of spacesuits hanging invitingly at the entrance to the airlock. "Take one," he said. "Put it on."

Aherne obeyed. His strange guide climbed into one of the smaller suits. Together, they passed through the airlock and outside the Dome.

"We go in this," the other grunted, and got into the sandcrawler. Aherne followed. The vehicle rocked smoothly to life and started to undulate away.

The crawler slid through a gap in the hills and pursued a twisting, sharply banked sand path in the desert. An hour later, they arrived at their destination—the second dome.

It seemed to be constructed along the lines of the other. Aherne stared around curiously as he and his silent companion went through the by-now familiar process of passing through the airlocks. At last, he was out of his suit and within the second dome. It looked much like the first, inside and out.

But after a few steps, Aherne found himself panting for breath, and a few more and he could sense his pulse quickening. There was a difference: the air-pressure here was considerably lower than Earth-normal. He felt his body gasping to take in the quantity of oxygen to which it was accustomed, and he swallowed hard to relieve the pressure on his eardrums.

As he stood there, reeling slightly from the change in pressure, he saw a second small, swarthy, Spanish-looking man approaching. But this time it was a face that Aherne knew well.

"You'll get used to the low pressure soon, Aherne," the newcomer said as he drew near. "We maintain it here for the benefit of our colonists." He extended a box of tablets. "Here," he said. "Aspirin. It'll relieve the reaction a little bit."

Aherne took the box, fumbled out one of the white tablets, and swallowed it dry. In a moment the pounding in his head subsided a little.

"What are *you* doing here, Echavarra?" Aherne said.

"You haven't missed me, Aherne? You haven't noticed that I've not been expounding my crackpot ideas at the United Nations these past three years?"

"No," Aherne said slowly. "Ever since the defeat of your proposal, I'd assumed you were off doing private research somewhere."

The man addressed as Echavarra grinned broadly. "Exactly right. I have been doing private research." He put an arm around Aherne's shoulder. "Come," he said. "Let us go to my home. The pressure is easier to take there."

As they walked into the heart of the colony, Aherne discovered that it appeared to be populated almost exclusively by the small, swarthy men, none of whom seemed at all bothered by the low pressure. The picture was starting to take shape.

José Echavarra had been a storm-center at the United

Nations Headquarters during the days of the hot debate over who should build the Mars Colony, and how. Echavarra, a Peruvian genitist, had bitterly opposed the American, Carter, who seemed to have the inside track on the coveted UN appropriation.

Carter had favored building pressurized domes on Mars, in which Earthmen could live in comparative comfort. Echavarra, raging, had declared that this was the wrong way to go about it—that man should adapt himself to fit the planet, not adapt the planet to fit himself.

He put forth as an example Andean miners who had been studied by Peruvian scientists. These miners lived all their lives at altitudes of 10,000 to 15,000 feet above sea-level, where the air was thin and the air-pressure low—and they had *adapted*. They were capable of existing comfortably with a pressure of only eight pounds per square inch. Echavarra had proposed to establish a colony composed of these hardy Peruvians, and gradually to breed them further along the lines they were already following, until they were suited to living comfortably in the thin air of Mars.

Aherne remembered clearly what had happened. The volatile Dr. Echavarra had spent long hours explaining his plan, and then it had been turned down flat. After all, one delegate remarked, the Echavarra plan meant that only one nation—Peru—could send men to Mars. Other peoples, raised on the customary fifteen-pounds-per-square-inch air pressure, would be incapable of surviving.

That ended the discussion. Echavarra was rejected firmly, and Raymond Carter had been chosen to head the pioneer expedition that would build the pressure-dome and establish the UN Colony, with the colonists, of course, to be chosen from all nations.

Echavarra had disappeared from sight. Now, here he was—complete with his colony of Peruvians after all. And the air pressure was low, all right. Aherne, weakening, dragged one leg after the other painfully as he followed Echavarra through the streets.

"In here," the Peruvian said. Aherne stumbled ahead as he was told, and entered a small, austere furnished room whose warm, rich atmosphere struck his lungs with jarring force.

"I keep one room at normal pressure," Echavarra explained.

"I'm still not completely used to the stuff these Andeans breathe myself, and I like to relax in here from time to time."

Aherne flung himself down on a hammock stretched tautly from wall to wall, and waited for his metabolism to return to normal.

"Whew!" he managed to say after a moment. "I'm not built for these pressure changes."

"You're suffering from anoxia," Echavarra said. "Lack of oxygen. The decreased pressure in this dome makes it harder for your lungs to get oxygen, and the quantity of red cells in your blood increases to compensate. It's rough for a while, but you'll adjust."

Aherne nodded. "I'll say it's rough."

"I'd guess you'd passed into the second threshold of anoxia," the Peruvian commented, bustling around nervously. "Which is about what I expected would happen."

"What do you mean?"

"We grade the levels of oxygen need on three thresholds," Echavarra explained. "The first is the *reaction threshold*. On Earth, it's generally encountered above 6,000 feet altitude. Pulse quickens; capillaries relax, allowing more blood to reach the cells. Some dizziness. And then comes stage two, as you go a little higher — *disturbance threshold*. You were just passing over that level when I got you in here. Characteristics are fuzziness of sight, dulling of the senses, slowness of muscle reaction. You know what it's like. It's unpleasant, but not dangerous."

"I see," said Aherne. He was still recovering his strength, and lay there unmoving. "Is there a third stage?"

"There is," Echavarra said. "*Critical threshold*. It's encountered when the pressure gets down to about one-half atmosphere. Loss of vision, pounding of heart, nosebleed, loss of muscular coordination, blackout of consciousness. Possibly convulsions. The ultimate crisis is death. Men just aren't built to take low pressure. Mars is a critical-threshold area at all times; on Earth, it's generally encountered only above 16,000 feet—such as in the Peruvian Andes," Echavarra concluded pointedly.

Aherne was feeling much better now. He swung himself to a sitting position and glared sharply at the Peruvian, who was toying with his stiff black mustache.

"All very interesting, Echavarra, though I suspect you didn't

smuggle me out here just to lecture me on high altitude conditions. How about the information I want to hear?"

Echavarra smiled urbanely. "Just what would you like to know?"

"First: what are you doing here? Who financed you?"

The small man's countenance darkened. "It is a sad story. After my unhappy rejection at the hands of the General Assembly, I traveled from country to country, seeking backers for my project. Finally I raised the necessary minimum, with the generous help of my own countrymen. Naturally we could not work on the scale Dr. Carter did, but we did manage to get together enough cash to transport several hundred Andean families here and build a fair-sized dome."

"Why?"

The other smiled. "I disagreed with the basic premise of Carter's project, and I wanted a chance to try it my way. My men are already acclimated to one-half atmosphere. They work and play happily in an environment that would kill a normal man. They've been living that way for generations. Genetically, they've been bred to survive in thin-air conditions.

"I'm reducing the pressure in this dome, ever so gradually. They don't notice it — but their bodies adapt to the slight changes. Eventually I hope to get it down to where it approximates that of Mars. I won't be here to see it. It won't be with these people, nor with their children—but somewhere along the line it'll happen. And then—poof! No more domes!"

"Interesting," said Aherne coldly. "Just why did you pull this little trick this morning and spirit me away, then?"

The Peruvian spread his dark-skinned hands. "You're here to decide on the fate of the Carter colony, are you not?"

Aherne nodded. "What if I am?"

Echavarra brought his bright-eyed, eager face close. Aherne noticed that it was lined with a fine purple network of exploded capillaries. "I brought you here to show you how I'm succeeding with my genetics program. I want you to vote against Carter—and transfer the appropriation to me!"

Aherne recoiled instantly. "Impossible! The UN has already voted to support Carter. I can't see any reason to countermand their decision. Your work has some curiosity value, I suppose, but we can hardly give serious—"

"Not so fast," Echavarra said. "Don't leap off so blindly. You're here for a while. Take your time; consider the relative

merits of the two colonies. See for yourself which one is fitter to work and live on Mars."

Aherne shook his head. "I'm willing to abide by the decision of the General Assembly," he said. "Thanks for the offer, but I think I'd better get back to the UN Colony now, Echavarra."

"Stay a little longer," the Peruvian urged.

Aherne started to say no, but suddenly there was the sound of scuffling outside, and loud, angry shouting. And then the door burst open, and Sully Roberts, wearing a plastic oxygen-mask, strode into the room, half a dozen men behind him.

V

"You'll pay for this, Echavarra!" Roberts snapped angrily. His men formed a ring around Aherne; in the background, Aherne could see two or three puzzled-looking Peruvians standing on tiptoe trying to peer into the room.

"What do you mean, Mr. Roberts?"

"I mean you've kidnapped this man!" Roberts turned solicitously to Aherne. "They haven't harmed you at all, have they?"

Aherne shook his head. "No, I've—"

"There seems to be some misunderstanding," Echavarra said mildly. "Mr. Aherne was not *kidnapped*. He came here voluntarily, earlier this morning, to inspect our colony. Is this not correct, Mr. Aherne?"

The UN man saw the faces of the six men from Carter's colony go tense. They were worried now; perhaps Echavarra had succeeded in seducing him over to his side? Aherne decided to remain noncommittal for the moment.

"I wouldn't say I was kidnapped," he replied, smiling. "I did, indeed, come here voluntarily."

"You see?" Echavarra said.

Robert's face was a mask of anguish and turmoil "But—"

"I want to assure you that Mr. Aherne has not been harmed," Echavarra said. "And now, if you'll excuse us while we finish our discussion—"

"We're expecting him to take part in some functions at our Dome," Roberts said. "We'd be very disappointed if he remained here with you."

Careful use of the third person in speaking about me, Aherne noted. They're afraid of seeming to be controlling me.

"I think they're right, Señor Echavarra," Aherne said. "I do have a responsibility to the Carter colony at the moment."

"I hope you'll give careful consideration to the matter I mentioned, Mr. Aherne."

"I'll think about it," Aherne promised. It was the diplomatic thing to say. "But as of now, I intend to rely on the earlier decision of the Assembly."

"Very well," Echavarra said, half-frowning and bowing politely. "But I do hope to see you again before you leave Mars—and perhaps you'll have changed your mind."

"Perhaps," Aherne said. He turned to Roberts. "I think it's time to go back now."

When they were outside, walking briskly through the thin air of the Peruvian colony on their way to the airlock, Roberts allowed some of his anxiety to escape.

"We were sure worried there, Mr. Aherne. As soon as we found out you'd been seen leaving the colony in the company of one of these little Indians, we lit out after you."

"What were you afraid of?" Aherne asked as they reached the airlock.

"Well, sir, you didn't leave any message, and we were sure you were kidnapped. Of course, we didn't know you had decided to visit the Peruvians without telling us," Roberts said.

Implied in that, thought Aherne, is veiled criticism. What he's hinting at is that I had no business running off like that—or that perhaps I really was kidnapped, and won't admit it.

"Echavarra and I are old acquaintances," Aherne said. "I had a good deal of contact with him in the days before his project was turned down by the UN."

"He's a crackpot, of course," Roberts asserted quickly. The big man boosted Aherne lightly up into the sandcrawler and followed him in. "This idea of breeding people to breathe Martian air can't possibly work, can it?"

"I'm not so sure of that." Aherne saw the immediate expression of despair reflected on Roberts' open face, and rejoiced just a little in his own wickedness. He was baiting Roberts, taking advantage of the colonist's desperate desire to win Aherne's approval, and while he knew it was unfair it was also a little enjoyable.

After a long silence, during which both men had kept eyes fixed firmly and uncomfortably on the trackless wastes ahead,

Roberts said, "You don't mean you'll consider giving them our appropriation, do you?"

Aherne considered possible answers for a moment or two – and then, seeing no real justification for allowing Roberts to worry over the possibility of an outcome that Aherne himself had already rejected, said, "No, of course not. The UN's already voted to support the Carter colony, and I don't see any reason for bringing Echavarra back into the picture."

Anxious faces greeted him as he clambered through the airlock of the UN Dome and re-entered the Colony. He spotted the remaining members of the committee of six, and a handful of other very worried-looking colonists.

Dr. Raymond Carter was the first to come up to him. But before anything could be said, Roberts interposed himself and explained where Aherne had been, and why.

"Visiting Echavarra, eh?" Carter said. "That crank? Did he have anything interesting to say? Last I heard, he was working on some plan for making those Indians of his survive on Jupiter—or was it the photosphere of the sun?"

Aherne smiled at the exaggeration, but ignored the comment. "I'm sorry for the delay," he said. "I felt it was necessary to examine the Peruvian colony as well as yours—as a sort of control to use in judging your own Dome."

Carter eyed him uneasily. "You weren't taken in by Echavarra, were you?"

"No," Aherne said. "At least, I see no reason to reverse the decision of the General Assembly in regard to the appropriation." He saw Carter relax visibly, and immediately added, "I do, of course, want to examine your own colony in detail before reaching any decision on your progress and future potentialities."

"Naturally," Carter said uneasily. "You can proceed with your tour of the Colony at once, if you wish. Miss Greer will be happy to accompany you wherever you would like to go."

Carter appeared almost absurdly grateful that Aherne had not deserted to the camp of the Peruvian geneticist. As he walked away toward the heart of the Colony with the voluble Miss Greer, Aherne found himself wishing he could be in a position to be honest with these people—to tell them how much he admired their accomplishments, to tell them how badly he

was hoping to be able to put through a positive recommendation for continuation of the Colony.

But he had to be sure, first. An emotional identification with these pioneers was dangerous, threatening to undermine his judgment. Aherne knew his appraisal would have to be cold, rational, and remorseless. The outcome was still in doubt, so far as Special Attaché Michael Aherne was concerned.

VI

Miss Greer was tall, slim, attractive, and ready to do almost anything to win Aherne's approval. Aherne wondered, in a detached sort of way, just how far that attitude could be carried.

"You're unmarried?" Aherne asked, wondering why such a handsome girl would have felt any urge to uproot herself from Earth and join the Colony.

She lowered her eyes. "My husband's dead," she said. "I've resumed my maiden name. It's the custom here."

"Oh. Sorry to hear that," Aherne said lamely. They turned down the long row of low-lying little houses that were situated between the airlock and the school building, which was their first stop.

"He was killed during the building of the Dome," she said. "There were eleven casualties during the time we cast it. He was one of them. I came here because of him—but I'm staying now for myself. I feel I belong here; I have work to do. Doing something important—not just for myself, but for the world."

Aherne grunted something unintelligible; he wanted to keep the discussion away from sentiment, pinned down on a level of fact. "How did they die?" he asked.

"A section fell on them. It's the only major accident we've had."

"The Colony has a low hospital record, then?"

"Fairly low. We've had plenty of minor troubles, though. Before we started posting guards at the airlock, we'd have children wandering through and outside the Dome—but we stopped that quick enough. And then we had a spell of pto-maine last year; no deaths, but we were all pretty sick for a while. And there's been a lot of gravity sickness—that's our biggest problem."

"How so?" Aherne asked.

"Well, of course you know the gravity here is only about 40 per cent of Earth's, and it takes a little while to get adjusted to it. Some people had digestion problems—the food wouldn't go down properly. And one problem we haven't licked yet is pregnancy. Women just aren't built to deliver children in less than one-half grav. The muscles can't manage it."

That was one factor Aherne hadn't considered. "But children are born here, aren't they?"

"Oh, yes!" Miss Greer said, her face brightening. "Wait till you see our schoolroom! But it's risky, of course. We've built a small grav chamber in which all our deliveries are made. The problem is keeping a close check on all expectant mothers, and making sure they're within reach of the grav chamber when labor begins. Occasionally someone will premature, and there's no time to get her to the chamber. It's very complicated then."

Aherne nodded. He was noting all these things carefully. Miss Greer, he reflected, was an ideal guide. Not only was she attractive to be with, she was neither as self-conscious nor as tight-lipped as the men seemed to be, and she was revealing all sorts of facts about the Colony that Aherne might never have found out otherwise.

Facts which needed to be evaluated, to be fitted into the problem: *Is the Mars Colony promising enough to be worth continuing?*

The schoolroom was a delight. Aherne saw two dozen scrubbed, sprightly youngsters go through drills in arithmetic and spelling with about as much accuracy as could be expected, and then, at dismissal, go tumbling out of the classroom with an appealingly coltish agility. There didn't seem to be an unhappy child in the lot, nor a self-conscious one, nor a homely one. The psychologists who had chosen the colonists for the trip had chosen well.

The children ranged from three to ten years in age, with a big gap in the five-to-seven group. That was easily explainable, of course; the colony had been planted five years ago, and no pregnant women nor children under two had been allowed to go. So there was a definite hiatus in the procession of age; children who had gone on the original ship were now eight and above, while those born in the Colony were no older than four.

The youngsters moved with more assurance and poise than their parents, Aherne noticed. It made sense; they had been

bred in the Martian gravity; their muscles were not previously trained by a lifetime spent on Earth, and so they were able to cope with Mars' light pull more easily. *They are adapting*, Aherne thought.

He moved on, from the schoolroom to the local library, from the library to the print shop where Mars' one daily newsheet was turned out. There, he was shown with pride the unfinished, unbound copy of Dr. Carter's history of the Mars Colony, from its inception right through to the conclusion of its fifth year of activity. Aherne, looking at the contents page, noticed that the book was hopefully inscribed, *Volume One*.

Miss Greer was a pleasant and affable companion, and she never failed to be a source of diverting and informative conversation. She showed him the central telephone switchboard, the building that housed the atmosphere-generator, and then the small theater in which a band of amateurs were rehearsing a performance of *Twelfth Night* to be given that evening.

Shakespeare on Mars? Why not, Aherne thought, watching the rehearsal unfold. The colonists were capturing the Bard's smoothly flowing poetry with rare skill and insight. Aherne sat entranced in the small, cushionless-seated theater for over an hour, and asked to meet the director afterward.

It turned out that the director was also the tall, deep-voiced man who had played Malvolio. His name was Patchford. Aherne complimented him both on his performance and on his directing.

"Thank you, sir," the colonist said. "You're planning to attend our performance, aren't you?"

"Certainly," Aherne said. "Have you been doing much Shakespeare?"

"No, unfortunately," Patchford said sadly. "Our Complete Shakespeare was destroyed somehow in transit, and we haven't been able to get a replacement from Earth yet. It was sheer luck that I had appeared in a small stock-company that was doing *Twelfth Night*, not long before I left Earth. I copied all the parts from memory, and that's the version we're doing."

"It sounded accurate enough to me."

"I hope so," said Patchford, grinning. "Until the UN gets around to microfilming another Shakespeare for us, it's the best we can offer."

"I'll be looking forward to seeing it tonight," Aherne said sincerely, and he and Miss Greer moved on.

The next stop was the town hall, a rugged-looking, half-finished auditorium. From there, it was over to the hydroponics plant, where Aherne talked learnedly with a couple of the boys working there. He saw that his 'ponics-talk made a tremendous impression on Miss Greer, and he didn't care to disturb her belief in his omniscience by telling her that he had been a hydroponics technician himself for a while before entering UN service.

Aherne noted that the 'ponics plant was admirably set up, and he sampled some of its products—radishes, which seemed just a little bit tasteless, and tomatoes, which tasted fine.

And then, at last, Miss Greer decided that Aherne had seen enough of the colony for one day. She accompanied him to Carter's house, where they were scheduled to eat dinner, with a visit to Patchford's Shakespeare production slated for later in the evening. Aherne felt tired, excited, pleased, and very much less in doubt about his eventual decision.

VII

Busy days followed, as Aherne, always the centre of interest, was given a thoroughgoing look at life in the Colony. The colonists were all unfailingly polite and helpful; they were aware that they were on trial, and they were trying to live up to whatever standards Aherne could possibly set for them.

Life under the low gravity was awkward, at times, and the artificial atmosphere's faint staleness made Aherne long for the fresh air of Earth. But otherwise, the technical end of the Colony seemed to be well under control.

They were far from being self-sufficient, of course; food shipments from Earth were still of vital importance, supplementing the diets turned out by the hydroponics and the budding synthetics factory. The plan was to convert Mars' arid land into fertile soil once again, but that would take years, perhaps centuries.

Psychologically, the Colony seemed beautifully balanced. The men who had chosen the colonists had chosen wisely, despite the handicap of having to follow a prearranged nationalistic plan of choice. The eleven hundred inhabitants of the UN Dome were as sane an assortment of people as Aherne had ever seen gathered together in one place.

The Colony had, in general, lived up to expectations. And,

on the morning when José Echavarrá came to visit him, Aherne had just about made up his mind about the sort of report he was going to turn in.

The little Peruvian appeared suddenly, unexpectedly. Aherne, enjoying a moment of relaxation, was reading a reasonably good novel written by Roy Clellan, a colonist, and published at the Colony print shop. He looked up in surprise as Echavarrá entered.

"Hello, Aherne."

"Echavarrá! How'd you get past the airlock guard?"

The geneticist shrugged. "There is no law against my coming here, is there? Besides, I told the guard outside that if he didn't let me through, I'd simply radio over from my dome and tell you that I'd been turned away. He was in a cleft stick, and all he could do was let me in."

"So here you are," Aherne said. "What do you want?"

Echavarrá took a seat on the edge of Aherne's bed, and folded his thin, dark fingers into a complex pattern. "You remember our earlier conversation?"

"I do," Aherne said. "What of it?"

"Are you still of your former opinion?"

"If what you mean is, do I intend to squash Carter's colony and turn the appropriation over to you, the answer is no."

Echavarrá frowned. "Still no, eh? That means you must have been impressed with this little colony here."

"I was," said Aherne. "Very highly."

The small man scowled expressively. "You still do not understand. These people here—they are only guests on Mars! They are temporary visitors, staying here by sufferance of their dome. But they will always be outsiders, always dependent on artificial atmosphere!"

"I told you I don't care to discuss it," Aherne said stiffly. "These people have set up a truly wonderful social organization. Can you say the same of your high-altitude Andeans?"

"No," the other replied. "Not yet. But we will be able to breathe the air of Mars, one day. The social organization can come later, once the physical handicaps are overcome."

"I don't agree. You've taken men acclimated to high altitudes, low air pressure—but what kind of men are they? Do they represent the best of humanity? No. They're just ignorant, primitive people who happen to have developed a certain kind

of physical endurance. You can't build a world with them."

"You can't build a world with people who must hide beneath a dome," Echavarra retorted. "But I see I will get nowhere with you. I trust you'll have the kindness to inform the United Nations of my whereabouts, though, and of the success of my project?"

"I'll do that," Aherne said. "For what it's worth."

Echavarra dropped a thick sheaf of papers on the bed. "Here's my report. I've analyzed the tolerance of my men to low pressure, discussed the integrated adaptations that will be necessary to produce a fully Marsworthy race, and included some details of the biochemical analyses of muscular tissues that my associates have been making. One of them has been studying myoglobin, a form of hemoglobin which is particularly useful in governing the rate of oxygen-unloading in—but there's no point in telling this to you, is there? If you see fit, turn these papers over to the interested parties."

"I'll do that," Aherne said. "Look, Echavarra—I'm not trying to be deliberately cruel about this. I'm not here to decide whether your setup is more worthy of development than Carter's; so far as I'm concerned, that's been decided long ago. All I wanted to do was to see if the Carter colony is working. And it is. I'm satisfied."

"You're filing the report, then?"

"I am," Aherne said. It was the first time he had voiced the decision aloud, and now he was more certain than ever that it was right.

"Very good," Echavarra snapped. "I won't attempt to persuade you any further."

"It won't help," Aherne said. He felt genuinely sympathetic toward Echavarra, but as things stood there was nothing he could do. Carter's colony deserved support. Even discounting the fact that they were probably putting on a special demonstration for Aherne's benefit, the Colony seemed to be the first true example of cooperation between human beings on every level Aherne had ever seen.

Aherne picked up Echavarra's papers and tidied them into a neat stack. "I'll take care of these," he said.

"Thank you," the Peruvian said simply. He stared searchingly at Aherne for a moment. Then he turned and left.

Aherne made his decision known publicly later that day. In

a short, tersely worded statement which he handed silently to Dr. Carter, he told of his great delight in seeing how the Colony functioned, and stated definitely that he planned to support continuation of the appropriation on an indefinite basis.

Carter read the statement through and looked up at Aherne. "Thanks," he said bluntly.

"Don't thank me. It's your own hard work that's done this. I'm one hundred per cent sold on your colony here, Dr. Carter."

"I'm glad to hear that," the graying leader said. "For a while at the beginning, you seemed very dubious about the way things were doing here."

"It was just a pose," Aherne confessed.

"That was obvious. I could tell how much you really liked the things you were seeing. Miss Greer reported that you were just bubbling with enthusiasm."

"I was," said Aherne, privately annoyed that he had not managed to conceal his feelings better. "I'm firmly convinced that you're on the right track here."

"I'll go announce this to the Colony at large," Carter said. "They'll be glad to know our life's been extended a while longer."

My work is done, Aherne thought. It would be good to get back to Earth, to the UN, now that the pressure of decision was ended. He felt relieved that he had been able to square his decision with his conscience. It was a good feeling.

He turned to his desk, and began to make some tentative notes toward the final report he would have to file. He started sketching out a preliminary outline of Colony life.

After two sentences, he halted, disturbed. Echavarra's harsh words were echoing in his head, seeming to mock him and stamp him for a fool. "*These people—they are only guests on Mars!*" he heard once again. And: "*You can't build a world with people who must hide beneath a dome.*"

The Peruvian's dry, incisive voice needled into his brain, and refused to be forgotten. Aherne chewed the end of his stylo reflectively for a moment or two. The tenor of his mind swayed. He pictured Echavarra, punctuating each word with a jab of his forefinger against the air—the artificial air of the Dome.

Am I right? Who knows? Aherne asked himself, and slowly with not as much inner conviction as he had felt a moment before, he began to fill out his report.

VIII

Deep in the cold, frozen ground, a long, fine line cut through the desert—a fault-line, far below the surface. A dark slit that indicated the end of one geological formation and the beginning of the next.

Along the fault-line was exerted the pressure of the tons of sand and mountain above. Gradually, slowly, over a period of centuries, that fault began to slip. One side depressed; the other inexorably raised. The process continued imperceptibly, until the day when the ground shivered, the final barriers broke, and a pit yawned where no pit had been before.

An entire geological formation—a block of granite some hundreds of miles square—went rearing up like a singed stallion. The broken desert shuddered. And catastrophe struck the unsuspecting domes planted square athwart the fault-line.

Aherne had been planning to leave that day. Valoinen and his ship were scheduled to make their regular appearance the following morning, and Aherne was in the process of saying his goodbyes when it happened. The ground seemed to scream in pain, and then everything tipped sideways. The moorings of the Dome broke loose from the land, stresses that had not been planned for rippled across the dome, and a jagged split ran through the gleaming plastic from end to end.

Aherne felt the cold come rushing in. The atmosphere, so carefully generated, fled in an instant, and the harsh, nitrogen-laden air of Mars came swooping down.

"Spacesuits!" someone screamed, and the panic was on. Eleven hundred people dashing for spacesuits at the same moment. Children underfoot, screaming adults, frightened women.

Aherne gasped for breath; his head spun, and his eyes bugged wide. What had the Peruvian said? This was *critical threshold*—this was the moment from which there was no escape. The faint glimmer of the sun drifted mockingly through the rent Dome. This was it, now: the air of Mars. The unbreathable, cold, biting air of Mars. Critical threshold.

Somehow he found a spacesuit, and somehow he made his leaden fingers go through the motions that would get him inside the suit. He could barely see; his cold-nipped hands would not respond. But finally he was inside it, with air—real air—surging up around him.

Aherne leaned against the cold, corrugated-steel wall of a building for a moment, dazed, unable to understand what had happened. One moment he had been chatting amiably with Kate Greer and Sully Roberts; a moment later the sky had split, and he was fumbling to safety in the dark.

He sucked in air, gulped it down and let it warm his lungs, while his body slowly returned to normal. And then he looked around.

The scene was frightful. Wherever he looked, there were colonists. Most had managed to find spacesuits; those who hadn't, and that included a handful of children, were huddled in unconsciousness on the ground, blue-faced from oxygen loss.

Sully Roberts was next to him, folded up in a heap along the wall near the open chest where the emergency spacesuits were stored. Roberts had managed to get himself inside a suit in time, but passing the critical threshold of anoxia had been too much for him; the big man was unconscious.

"Sully! Sully!"

After a moment, Roberts looked up. He struggled to his feet, shook his head tentatively, and clawed for his balance. Aherne steadied him.

It was like moving in a nightmare world.

Roberts pointed to a body lying a hundred yards away. A colonist who hadn't made it.

"Let's get going," Roberts said hoarsely. "Maybe we can save some of them."

Later, when everything was calm and a measure of order had been restored, the shattered colony tried to take stock. A general meeting was ordered in the central auditorium, and slowly the dazed, spacesuited figures filtered in.

Aherne took his seat at the side. It was only now that the reaction was starting to hit him. He felt overwhelming bitterness, anger at this cosmic joke—for now they knew that the Marsquake had wrecked the Dome. The report was written, the future of the Colony assured—and now, this.

He heard Carter's voice dully calling the roll.

"Anderson, David and Joan."

"Here."

"Antonelli, Leo, Marie, and Helen."

"Here."

And then the dead silence after a name, and the repetition,

and then the checkmark made on the long sheet that told of the dead. The toll-taking continued through the day until finally the extent of the damage was known.

There were sixty-three dead, Carter announced, and fifty-seven in critical condition. The backlash of the quake had shattered the Dome beyond repair. Otherwise, the colony had not been harmed badly—but it would have to start from the beginning, now. If there was to be any starting over at all.

Sully Roberts was despatched to the Peruvian dome to find out how things were there. Aherne watched the big man go, out through the useless air lock and into his sandcrawler.

It was a tragic situation, Aherne thought. And then, slowly, he came to see that it was not. The quake could have happened at any time—but, as if some Power were guiding it, it had burst at the very moment of Aherne's decision. It had waited until the returns were in, and then had unleashed its fury to show Aherne the fatal weakness in the entire dome setup.

They had planned and planned—and yet had not figured on an upheaval of the ground a hundred miles away. They could never have planned on it.

Now, and only now, was Aherne sure of what had to be done.

They remained in the meeting hall, sitting quietly, waiting for Roberts to return. Aherne studied the faces of the men near him—faces that reflected the dream that had turned into a nightmare in a sudden single unforeseen moment.

Abruptly the door opened and Sully Roberts burst in, hardly ten minutes after he had left.

"What's the matter, Sully?" Carter called from the dais. "Didn't get there?"

"No need to," Roberts said. "I met the whole batch of them on the way. Their dome was smashed too, but they got things under control quicker than we did and the whole Peruvian colony set out *en masse* to see if we needed help."

Roberts stepped to one side and Echavarra entered the hall, clad in a brightly colored spacesuit that looked oddly out of place in the drab assembly. Behind him, Aherne could see a swarm of small, spacesuited figures—the Andeans.

"We've come to see what we could do," Echavarra said. "The quake got our dome too—but naturally my people didn't feel

the effects of the sudden change in air as much as yours did, since we were conditioned to something almost as bad."

Of course, Aherne thought. The Peruvians would simply have moved in a leisurely fashion toward the nearest space-suits. No panic, no casualties.

Aherne stood up. "Dr. Carter?"

"Yes, Mr. Aherne?"

"Would you mind calling a recess of the meeting for a while? I'd like to speak to you and Dr. Echavarra privately."

Aherne felt as if he held the future of Mars in his hands as he looked across the table, flicking anxious glances from sad-eyed Carter to Echavarra and back.

"I'll put it bluntly," Aherne said to Carter. "I'm going to have to rescind my earlier report. Your colony is definitely not suited for continuation."

Carter went white. "But we can rebuild the Dome! You said—"

"I know what I said," Aherne cut in smoothly. "But it's all been voided by this quake. Dr. Echavarra put it very nicely for me during one of our meetings: you and your colony are only guests here. You're subject to the whims of the landscape for survival. It can't work on any long-range basis. You can't pin all your hopes on a fragile dome, and expect to build a lasting colony."

Carter seemed to shrink in on himself. He bowed his head. "Then I was wrong," he said. "The quake proved it."

Echavarra's beady eyes lit up. "Does that mean you're shifting to my side, Mr. Aherne?"

"Not quite," Aherne said. "You have part of the right answer: your men were adapted enough to be able to ride with the blow when the dome was destroyed, and in a couple of generations they won't even need the dome. But they're not material for building a new world with. They're ignorant, primitive men with low cultural possibilities, who happen to have high survival quotients."

He turned to face Carter, sensing now that the situation was completely in his grasp for the first time since he'd left Earth. Now he understood the entire picture, and now he knew what his report would say.

"Dr. Carter, you've got the other side of the coin. High cultural level, low survival factor. Everything about your colony

was marvelous—except the fact that it would fold up like a paper bag at the first crack in the dome.”

Carter nodded grimly. “So we’ve discovered.”

Aherne leaned forward. “Now—does what I’ve just said suggest a solution?”

“Could we—build one big dome for both colonies?” Carter asked hesitantly.

“Exactly. One dome. Assimilate. Mingle. Combine the hardness of your Peruvians, Dr. Echavarra, with the all-round ability of your men, Dr. Carter. Breed a new race from the two stocks,” Aherne said triumphantly. “A new race—capable of living on Mars and *belonging* there!”

“The pressure—” Echavarra said.

“Keep it at ten pounds for a while. It’ll be uncomfortable for both groups, but not for long. Eventually Dr. Carter’s group will develop the same kind of strength Dr. Echavarra’s men have. It may take a couple of generations, but it’ll work—eventually!”

The two leaders were glowing. “You’ll recommend this to the UN?” Carter asked.

“If you’re both agreed,” said Aherne.

They nodded as one.

“Let’s go back inside and announce the decision, then,” Aherne said. “Because you’ll have to get right to work building the new Dome. You can’t live in spacesuits for long, you know.”

“Right,” Carter said. He rose and led the way back to the meeting hall, where the colonists were waiting impatiently for word on what was happening.

Aherne took his seat at the side again. This was strictly Carter’s and Echavarra’s show, and he intended to remain completely detached.

As Carter began to speak, outlining the new plan, Aherne let his eyes wander around the auditorium. It was crowded—crowded with the tense-faced UN Colonists, and with the Peruvian men as well, garbed in their bright-colored spacesuits.

Aherne saw his report taking shape now—the memo that would set the pattern for man’s future conquest of the planets. Thankful that he had seen the right way in time, he sat back, relaxing at last, and listened to Carter’s enthusiastic voice as it rolled out majestically.

Then he looked down. Almost at his feet, he saw a Peruvian

boy of about nine, round and awkward in his lemon-yellow spacesuit, and one of the UN colonist children, a pretty blonde girl of four. They were staring shyly at each other in mutual curiosity.

Aherne watched them. They were the forerunners, the founders of the race of the future, the new men.

No. Not men, Aherne thought. Men are creatures who belong on Earth. Not men.

Martians.

COLLECTING TEAM

A time will come when men will get past the confines of our solar system and begin to explore the galaxy at large. There are millions of suns out there, and the chances are good that many of them have planets, and that at least some of those planets are inhabited.

Survey teams will go forth to examine and classify and record the strange forms of life found on those distant worlds. Some of the explorers, no doubt, will find themselves in unearthly dilemmas as a result.

From fifty thousand miles up, the situation looked promising. It was a middle-sized, brown-and-green, inviting-looking planet, with no sign of cities or any other such complications. Just a pleasant sort of place, the very sort we were looking for to redeem what had been a pretty futile expedition.

I turned to Clyde Holdreth, who was staring reflectively at the thermocouple.

"Well? What do you think?"

"Looks fine to me. Temperature's about seventy down there—nice and warm, and plenty of air. I think it's worth a try."

Lee Davison came strolling out from the storage hold, smelling of animals, as usual. He was holding one of the blue monkeys we picked up on Alpheraz, and the little beast was crawling up his arm. "Have we found something, gentlemen?"

"We've found a planet," I said. "How's the storage space in the hold?"

"Don't worry about that. We've got room for a whole zoo-full more, before we get filled up. It hasn't been a very fruitful trip."

"No," I agreed. "It hasn't. Well? Shall we go down and see what's to be seen?"

"Might as well," Holdreth said. "We can't go back to Earth with just a couple of blue monkeys and some anteaters, you know."

"I'm in favor of a landing too," said Davison. "You?"

I nodded. "I'll set up the charts, and you get your animals comfortable for deceleration."

Davison disappeared back into the storage hold, while Holdreth scribbled furiously in the logbook, writing down the coordinates of the planet below, its general description, and so forth. Aside from being a collecting team for the zoological department of the Bureau of Interstellar Affairs, we also double as a survey ship, and the planet down below was listed as *unexplored* on our charts.

I glanced out at the mottled brown-and-green ball spinning slowly in the viewport, and felt the warning twinge of gloom that came to me every time we made a landing on a new and strange world. Repressing it, I started to figure out a landing orbit. From behind me came the furious chatter of the blue monkeys as Davison strapped them into their acceleration cradles, and under that the deep, unmusical honking of the Rigelian anteaters, noisily bleating their displeasure.

The planet was inhabited, all right. We hadn't had the ship on the ground more than a minute before the local fauna began to congregate. We stood at the viewport and looked out in wonder.

"This is one of those things you dream about," Davison said, stroking his little beard nervously. "Look at them! There must be a thousand different species out there."

"I've never seen anything like it," said Holdreth.

I computed how much storage space we had left and how many of the thronging creatures outside we would be able to bring back with us. "How are we going to decide what to take and what to leave behind?"

"Does it matter?" Holdreth said gaily. "This is what you call an embarrassment of riches, I guess. We just grab the dozen most bizarre creatures and blast off—and save the rest for another trip. It's too bad we wasted all that time wandering around near Rigel."

"We *did* get the anteaters," Davison pointed out. They were his finds, and he was proud of them.

I smiled sourly. "Yeah. We got the anteaters there." The anteaters honked at that moment, loud and clear. "You know, that's one set of beasts I think I could do without."

"Bad attitude," Holdreth said. "Unprofessional."

"Whoever said I was a zoologist, anyway? I'm just a space-

ship pilot, remember. And if I don't like the way those ant-eaters talk—and—smell—I see no reason why I—”

“Say, look at that one,” Davison said suddenly.

I glanced out the viewport and saw a new beast emerging from the thick-packed vegetation in the background. I've seen some fairly strange creatures since I was assigned to the zoological department, but this one took the grand prize.

It was about the size of a giraffe, moving on long, wobbly legs and with a tiny head up at the end of a preposterous neck. Only it had six legs and a bunch of writhing snakelike tentacles as well, and its eyes, great violet globes, stood out nakedly on the ends of two thick stalks. It must have been twenty feet high. It moved with exaggerated grace through the swarm of beasts surrounding our ship, pushed its way smoothly toward the vessel, and peered gravely in at the viewport. One purple eye stared directly at me, the other at Davison. Oddly, it seemed to me as if it were trying to tell us something.

“Big one, isn't it?” Davison said finally.

“I'll bet you'd like to bring one back, too.”

“Maybe we can fit a young one aboard,” Davison said. “If we can find a young one.” He turned to Holdreth. “How's that air analysis coming? I'd like to get out there and start collecting. God, that's a crazy-looking beast!”

The animal outside had apparently finished its inspection of us, for it pulled its head away and, gathering its legs under itself, squatted near the ship. A small doglike creature with stiff spines running along its back began to bark at the big creature, which took no notice. The other animals, which came in all shapes and sizes, continued to mill around the ship, evidently very curious about the newcomer to their world. I could see Davison's eyes thirsty with the desire to take the whole kit and caboodle back to Earth with him. I knew what was running through his mind. He was dreaming of the ump-teen thousand species of extraterrestrial wildlife roaming around out there, and to each one he was attaching a neat little tag: *Something-or-other davisoni*.

“The air's fine,” Holdreth announced abruptly, looking up from his test-tubes. “Get your butterfly nets and let's see what we can catch.”

There was something I didn't like about the place. It was just

too good to be true, and I learned long ago that nothing ever is. There's always a catch someplace.

Only this seemed to be on the level. The planet was a bonanza for zoologists, and Davison and Holdreth were having the time of their lives, hipdeep in obliging specimens.

"I've never seen anything like it," Davison said for at least the fiftieth time, as he scooped up a small purplish squirrel-like creature and examined it curiously. The squirrel stared back, examining Davison just as curiously.

"Let's take some of these," Davison said. "I like them."

"Carry 'em on in, then," I said, shrugging. I didn't care which specimens they chose, so long as they filled up the storage hold quickly and let me blast off on schedule. I watched as Davison grabbed a pair of the squirrels and brought them into the ship.

Holdreth came over to me. He was carrying a sort of a dog with insect-faceted eyes and gleaming furless skin. "How's this one, Gus?"

"Fine," I said bleakly. "Wonderful."

He put the animal down—it didn't scamper away, just sat there smiling at us—and looked at me. He ran a hand through his fast-vanishing hair. "Listen, Gus, you've been gloomy all day. What's eating you?"

"I don't like this place," I said.

"Why? Just on general principles?"

"It's too *easy*, Clyde. Much too easy. These animals just flock around here waiting to be picked up."

Holdreth chuckled. "And you're used to a struggle, aren't you? You're just angry at us because we have it so simple here!"

"When I think of the trouble we went through just to get a pair of miserable vile-smelling anteaters, and—"

"Come off it, Gus. We'll load up in a hurry, if you like. But this place is a zoological gold mine!"

I shook my head. "I don't like it, Clyde. Not at all."

Holdreth laughed again and picked up his faceted-eyed dog. "Say, know where I can find another of these, Gus?"

"Right over there," I said, pointing. "By that tree. With its tongue hanging out. It's just waiting to be carried away."

Holdreth looked and smiled. "What do you know about that!" He snared his specimen and carried both of them inside.

I walked away to survey the grounds. The planet was too

flatly incredible for me to accept on face value, without at least a look-see, despite the blithe way my two companions were snapping up specimens.

For one thing, animals just don't exist this way—in big miscellaneous quantities, living all together happily. I hadn't noticed more than a few of each kind, and there must have been five hundred different species, each one stranger-looking than the next. Nature doesn't work that way.

For another, they all seemed to be on friendly terms with one another, though they acknowledged the unofficial leadership of the giraffe-like creature. Nature doesn't work *that* way, either. I hadn't seen one quarrel between the animals yet. That argued that they were all herbivores, which didn't make sense ecologically.

I shrugged my shoulders and walked on.

Half an hour later, I knew a little more about the geography of our bonanza. We were on either an immense island or a peninsula of some sort, because I could see a huge body of water bordering the land some ten miles off. Our vicinity was fairly flat, except for a good-sized hill from which I could see the terrain.

There was a thick, heavily-wooded jungle not too far from the ship. The forest spread out all the way toward the water in one direction, but ended abruptly in the other. We had brought the ship down right at the edge of the clearing. Apparently most of the animals we saw lived in the jungle.

On the other side of our clearing was a low, broad plain that seemed to trail away into a desert in the distance; I could see an uninviting stretch of barren sand that contrasted strangely with the fertile jungle to my left. There was a small lake to the side. It was, I saw, the sort of country likely to attract a varied fauna, since there seemed to be every sort of habitat within a small area.

And the fauna! Although I'm a zoologist only by osmosis, picking up both my interest and my knowledge second-hand from Holdreth and Davison, I couldn't help but be astonished by the wealth of strange animals. They came in all different shapes and sizes, colors and odors, and the only thing they all had in common was their friendliness. During the course of my afternoon's wanderings a hundred animals must have come marching boldly right up to me, given me the once-over, and

walked away. This included half a dozen kinds that I hadn't seen before, plus one of the eye-stalked, intelligent-looking giraffes and a furless dog. Again, I had the feeling that the giraffe seemed to be trying to communicate.

I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all.

I returned to our clearing, and saw Holdreth and Davison still buzzing madly around, trying to cram as many animals as they could into our hold.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Hold's all full," Davison said. "We're busy making our alternate selections now." I saw him carrying out Holdreth's two furless dogs and picking up instead a pair of eight-legged penguinish things that uncomplainingly allowed themselves to be carried in. Holdreth was frowning unhappily.

"What do you want *those* for, Lee? Those dog-like ones seem much more interesting, don't you think?"

"No," Davison said. "I'd rather bring along these two. They're curious beasts, aren't they? Look at the muscular network that connects the—"

"Hold it, fellows," I said. I peered at the animal in Davison's hands and glanced up. "This *is* a curious beast," I said. "It's got eight legs."

"You becoming a zoologist?" Holdreth asked, amused.

"No—but I am getting puzzled. Why should this one have eight legs, some of the others here six, and some of the others only four?"

They looked at me blankly, with the scorn of professionals.

"I mean, there ought to be some sort of logic to evolution here, shouldn't there? On Earth we've developed a four-legged pattern of animal life; on Venus, they usually run to six legs. But have you ever seen an evolutionary hodgepodge like this place before?"

"There are stranger setups," Holdreth said. "The symbiotes on Sirius Three, the burrowers of Mizar—but you're right, Gus. This *is* a peculiar evolutionary dispersal. I think we ought to stay and investigate it fully."

Instantly I knew from the bright expression on Davison's face that I had blundered, had made things worse than ever. I decided to take a new tack.

"I don't agree," I said. "I think we ought to leave with what we've got, and come back with a larger expedition later."

Davison chuckled. "Come on, Gus, don't be silly! This is a

chance of a lifetime for us— why should we call in the whole zoological department on it?"

I didn't want to tell them I was afraid of staying longer. I crossed my arms. "Lee, I'm the pilot of this ship, and you'll have to listen to me. The schedule calls for a brief stopover here, and we have to leave. Don't tell me I'm being silly."

"But you are, man! You're standing blindly in the path of scientific investigation, of—"

"Listen to me, Lee. Our food is calculated on a pretty narrow margin, to allow you fellows more room for storage. And this is strictly a collecting team. There's no provision for extended stays on any one planet. Unless you want to wind up eating your own specimens, I suggest you allow us to get out of here."

They were silent for a moment. Then Holdreth said, "I guess we can't argue with that, Lee. Let's listen to Gus and go back now. There's plenty of time to investigate this place later when we can take longer."

"But—oh, all right," Davison said reluctantly. He picked up the eight-legged penguins. "Let me stash these things in the hold, and we can leave." He looked strangely at me, as if I had done something criminal.

As he started into the ship, I called to him.

"What is it, Gus?"

"Look here, Lee. I don't *want* to pull you away from here. It's simply a matter of food," I lied, masking my nebulous suspicions.

"I know how it is, Gus." He turned and entered the ship.

I stood there thinking about nothing at all for a moment, then went inside myself to begin setting up the blastoff orbit.

I got as far as calculating the fuel expenditure when I noticed something. Feedwires were dangling crazily down from the control cabinet. Somebody had wrecked our drive mechanism, but thoroughly.

For a long moment, I stared stiffly at the sabotaged drive. Then I turned and headed into the storage hold.

"Davison?"

"What is it, Gus?"

"Come out here a second. will you?"

I waited, and a few minutes later he appeared, frowning impatiently. "What do you want, Gus? I'm busy and I—" His mouth dropped open. "*Look at the drive!*"

"You look at it," I snapped. "I'm sick. Go get Holdreth, on the double."

While he was gone I tinkered with the shattered mechanism. Once I had the cabinet panel off and could see the inside, I felt a little better; the drive wasn't damaged beyond repair, though it had been pretty well scrambled. Three or four days of hard work with a screwdriver and solderbeam might get the ship back into functioning order.

But that didn't make me any less angry. I heard Holdreth and Davison entering behind me, and I whirled to face them.

"All right, you idiots. Which one of you did this?"

They opened their mouths in protesting squawks at the same instant. I listened to them for a while, then said, "One at a time!"

"If you're implying that one of us deliberately sabotaged the ship," Holdreth said, "I want you to know—"

"I'm not implying anything. But the way it looks to me, you two decided you'd like to stay here a while longer to continue your investigations, and figured the easiest way of getting me to agree was to wreck the drive." I glared hotly at them. "Well, I've got news for you. I can fix this, and I can fix it in a couple of days. So go on—get about your business! Get all the zoologizing you can in, while you still have time. I—"

Davison laid a hand gently on my arm. "Gus," he said quietly, "*We didn't do it. Neither of us.*"

Suddenly all the anger drained out of me and was replaced by raw fear. I could see that Davison meant it.

"If you didn't do it, and Holdreth didn't do it, and I didn't do it—then who did?"

Davison shrugged.

"Maybe it's one of us who doesn't know he's doing it," I suggested. "Maybe—" I stopped. "Oh, that's nonsense. Hand me that tool-kit, will you, Lee?"

They left to tend to the animals, and I set to work on the repair job, dismissing all further speculations and suspicions from my mind, concentrating solely on joining Lead A to Input A and Transistor F to Potentiometer K, as indicated. It was slow, nerve-harrowing work, and by mealtime I had accomplished only the barest preliminaries. My fingers were starting to quiver from the strain of small-scale work, and I decided to give up the job for the day and get back to it tomorrow.

I slept uneasily, my nightmares punctuated by the moaning

of the accursed anteaters and the occasional squeals, chuckles, bleats, and hisses of the various other creatures in the hold. It must have been four in the morning before I dropped off into a really sound sleep, and what was left of the night passed swiftly. The next thing I knew, hands were shaking me and I was looking up into the pale, tense faces of Holdreth and Davison.

I pushed my sleep-stuck eyes open and blinked. "Huh? What's going on?"

Holdreth leaned down and shook me savagely. "Get up, Gus!"

I struggled to me feet slowly. "Hell of a thing to do, wake a fellow up in the middle of the—"

I found myself being propelled from my cabin and led down the corridor to the control room. Blearily, I followed where Holdreth pointed, and then I woke up in hurry.

The drive was battered again. Someone—or *something*—had completely undone my repair job of the night before.

If there had been bickering among us, it stopped. This was past the category of a joke now; it couldn't be laughed off, and we found ourselves working together as a tight unit again, trying desperately to solve the puzzle before it was too late.

"Let's review the situation," Holdreth said, pacing nervously up and down the control cabin. "The drive has been sabotaged twice. None of us knows who did it, and on a conscious level each of us is convinced *he* didn't do it."

He paused. "That leaves us with two possibilities. Either, as Gus suggested, one of us is doing it unaware of it even himself, or someone else is doing it while we're not looking. Neither possibility is a very cheerful one."

"We can stay on guard, though," I said. "Here's what I propose; first, have one of us awake at all times—sleep in shifts, that is, with somebody guarding the drive until I get it fixed. Two—jettison all the animals aboard ship."

"*What?*"

"He's right," Davison said. "We don't know what we may have brought aboard. They don't seem to be intelligent, but we can't be sure. That purple-eyed baby giraffe, for instance—suppose he's been hypnotizing us into damaging the drive ourselves? How can we tell?"

"Oh, but—" Holdreth started to protest, then stopped and

frowned soberly. "I suppose we'll have to admit the possibility," he said, obviously unhappy about the prospect of freeing our captives. "We'll empty out the hold, and you see if you can get the drive fixed. Maybe later we'll recapture them all, if nothing further develops."

We agreed to that, and Holdreth and Davison cleared the ship of its animal cargo while I set to work determinedly at the drive mechanism. By nightfall, I had managed to accomplish as much as I had the day before.

I sat up to watch the first shift, aboard the strangely quiet ship. I paced around the drive cabin, fighting the great temptation to doze off, and managed to last through until the time Holdreth arrived to relieve me.

Only—when he showed up, he gasped and pointed at the drive. It had been ripped apart a third time.

Now we had no excuse, no explanation. The expedition had turned into a nightmare.

I could only protest that I had remained awake my entire spell on duty, and that I had seen no one and no thing approach the drive panel. But that was hardly a satisfactory explanation, since it either cast guilt on me as the saboteur or implied that some unseen external power was repeatedly wrecking the drive. Neither hypothesis made sense, at least to me.

By now we had spent four days on the planet, and food was getting to be a major problem. My carefully budgeted flight schedule called for us to be two days out on our return journey to Earth by now. But we still were no closer to departure than we had been four days ago.

The animals continued to wander around outside, nosing up against the ship, examining it, almost fondling it, with those damned pseudo-giraffes staring soulfully at us always. The beasts were as friendly as ever, little knowing how the tension was growing within the hull. The three of us walked around like zombies, eyes bright and lips clamped. We were scared—all of us.

Something was keeping us from fixing the drive.

Something didn't want us to leave this planet.

I looked at the bland face of the purple-eyed giraffe staring through the viewport, and it stared mildly back at me. Around it was grouped the rest of the local fauna, the same incredible hodgepodge of improbable genera and species.

That night, the three of us stood guard in the control-room together. The drive was smashed anyway. The wires were soldered in so many places by now that the control panel was a mass of shining alloy, and I knew that a few more such sabotagings and it would be impossible to patch it together any more—if it wasn't so already.

The next night, I just didn't knock off. I continued soldering right on after dinner (and a pretty skimpy dinner it was, now that we were on close rations) and far on into the night.

By morning, it was as if I hadn't done a thing.

"I give up," I announced, surveying the damage. "I don't see any sense in ruining my nerves trying to fix a thing that won't stay fixed."

Holdreth nodded. He looked terribly pale. "We'll have to find some new approach."

"Yeah. Some new approach."

I yanked open the food closet and examined our stock. Even figuring in the synthetics we would have fed to the animals if we hadn't released them, we were low on food. We had overstayed even the safety margin. It would be a hungry trip back—if we ever did get back.

I clambered through the hatch and sprawled down on a big rock near the ship. One of the furless dogs came over and nuzzled in my shirt. Davison stepped to the hatch and called down to me.

"What are you doing out there, Gus?"

"Just getting a little fresh air. I'm sick of living aboard that ship." I scratched the dog behind his pointed ears, and looked around.

The animals had lost most of their curiosity about us, and didn't congregate the way they used to. They were meandering all over the plain, nibbling at little deposits of a white doughy substance. It precipitated every night. "Manna," we called it. All the animals seemed to live on it.

I folded my arms and leaned back.

We were getting to look awfully lean by the eighth day. I wasn't even trying to fix the ship any more: the hunger was starting to get me. But I saw Davison puttering around with my solderbeam.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to repair the drive," he said. "You don't want to,

but we can't just sit around, you know." His nose was deep in my repair guide, and he was fumbling with the release on the solderbeam.

I shrugged. "Go ahead, if you want to." I didn't care what he did. All I cared about was the gaping emptiness in my stomach, and about the dimly grasped fact that somehow we were stuck here for good.

"Gus?"

"Yeah?"

"I think it's time I told you something. I've been eating the manna for four days. It's good. It's nourishing stuff."

"You've been eating—the manna? Something that grows on an alien world? You crazy?"

"What else can we do? Starve?"

I smiled feebly, admitting that he was right. From somewhere in the back of the ship came the sounds of Holdreth moving around. Holdreth had taken this thing worse than any of us. He had a family back on Earth, and he was beginning to realize that he wasn't ever going to see them again.

"Why don't you get Holdreth?" Davison suggested. "Go out there and stuff yourselves with the manna. You've got to eat something."

"Yeah. What can I lose?" Moving like a mechanical man, I headed towards Holdreth's cabin. We would go out and eat the manna and cease being hungry, one way or another.

"Clyde?" I called. "Clyde?"

I entered his cabin. He was sitting at his desk, shaking convulsively, staring at the two streams of blood that trickled in red spurts from his slashed wrists.

"Clyde!"

He made no protest as I dragged him toward the infirmary cabin and got tourniquets around his arms, cutting off the bleeding. He just stared dully ahead, sobbing.

I slapped him and he came around. He shook his head dizzily, as if he didn't know where he was.

"I—I—"

"Easy, Clyde. Everything's all right."

"It's *not* all right," he said hollowly. "I'm still alive. Why didn't you let me die? Why didn't you—"

Davison entered the cabin. "What's been happening, Gus?"

"It's Clyde. The pressure's getting him. He tried to kill

himself, but I think he's all right now. Get him something to eat, will you?"

We had Holdreth straightened around by evening. Davison gathered as much of the manna as he could find, and we held a feast.

"I wish we had nerve enough to kill some of the local fauna," Davison said. "Then we'd have a feast—steaks and everything!"

"The bacteria," Holdreth pointed out quietly. "We don't dare."

"I know. But it's a thought."

"No more thoughts," I said sharply. "Tomorrow morning we start work on the drive panel again. Maybe with some food in our bellies we'll be able to keep awake and see what's happening here."

Holdreth smiled. "Good. I can't wait to get out of this ship and back to a normal existence. God, I just can't wait!"

"Let's get some sleep," I said. "Tomorrow we'll give it another try. We'll get back," I said with a confidence I didn't feel.

The following morning I rose early and got my tool-kit. My head was clear, and I was trying to put the pieces together without much luck. I started toward the control cabin.

And stopped.

And looked out the viewport.

I went back and awoke Holdreth and Davison. "Take a look out the port," I said hoarsely.

They looked. They gaped.

"It looks just like my house," Holdreth said. "My house on Earth."

"With all the comforts of home inside, I'll bet." I walked forward uneasily and lowered myself through the hatch. "Let's go look at it."

We approached it, while the animals frolicked around us. The big giraffe came near and shook its head gravely. The house stood in the middle of the clearing, small and neat and freshly-painted.

I saw it now. During the night, invisible hands had put it there. Had assembled and built a cozy little Earth-type house and dropped it next to our ship for us to live in.

"Just like my house," Holdreth repeated in wonderment.

"It should be," I said. "They grabbed the model from your mind, as soon as they found out we couldn't live on the ship indefinitely."

Holdreth and Davison asked as one, "What do you mean?"

"You mean you haven't figured this place out yet?" I licked my lips, getting myself used to the fact that I was going to spend the rest of my life here. "You mean you don't realize what this house is intended to be?"

They shook their heads, baffled. I glanced around, from the house to the useless ship to the jungle to the plain to the little pond. It all made sense now.

"They want to keep us happy," I said. "They knew we weren't thriving aboard the ship, so they—they built us something a little more like home."

"*They?* The giraffes?"

"Forget the giraffes. They tried to warn us, but it's too late. They're intelligent beings, but they're prisoners just like us. I'm talking about the ones who run this place. The super-aliens who make us sabotage our own ship and not even know we're doing it, who stand someplace up there and gape at us. The ones who dredged together this motley assortment of beasts from all over the galaxy. Now we've been collected too. This whole damned place is just a zoo—a zoo for aliens so far ahead of us we don't dare dream what they're like."

I looked up at the shimmering blue-green sky, where invisible bars seemed to restrain us, and sank down dismally on the porch of our new home. I was resigned. There wasn't any sense in struggling against *them*.

I could see the neat little placard now:

EARTHMEN. Native Habitat, Sol III.

DOUBLE DARE

Other planets may be inhabited by beings more like ourselves. Though their skins may be of strange colors, their biology altogether alien, and their appearance unusual, their minds may tick in a remarkably human way. Which can create complications for Earthmen who go among the aliens and find themselves enmeshed in delicate interstellar politics.

By the time the spaceship had finished juggling and actually stood firmly on Domerangi soil, Justin Marner was beginning to doubt his sanity.

"We must be crazy," he said softly. "We *must* be."

The other Earthman, who had been gazing out the viewplate at the green-and-gold alien vista, glanced around suddenly at Marner's remark. "Huh?"

"There are limits to which one goes in proving a point," Marner said. He indicated the scene outside. "This little journey exceeds the limits. Now that we're here, Kemridge, I'm sure of it. *Nobody* does things like this."

Kemridge glared sourly. "Don't be silly, Justin. You know why we're here, and you know how come we're here. This isn't any time to—"

"All right," Marner said. "I take it all back." He stared for a moment at his delicate, tapering fingers—the fingers that could have belonged to a surgeon, were they not the property of a top-rank technical engineer. "Don't pay any attention to whatever I just said. It's the strain that's getting me."

The doorbell of the cabin chimed melodiously.

"Come in," said Marner.

The door slid open and a Domerangi, clad in a bright yellow sash, gray-green buskins, and a glittering diadem of precious gems, stepped heavily into the cabin. He extended two of his five leathery tentacles in welcome.

"Hello, gentlemen. I see you've come through the trip in fine shape."

"What's going on now, Plorvash?" Marner asked.

"The ship has landed at a spaceport just outside the city,"

the alien said. "I've come to take you to your quarters. We're giving you two of the finest accommodations our planet can offer. We want your working conditions to be of the best."

"Glad to hear it," Marner said. He flicked a glance at his companion. "They're most considerate, aren't they, Dave?"

The taller of the two Earthmen nodded gravely. "Definitely."

Plorvash grinned and said, "Suppose you come with me now. You want to be well rested before you undertake your task. After all, you want to be at your best, since planetary pride is at stake."

"Of course," Marner said.

The alien grinned once again. "The test will begin as soon as you wish. May I offer you good luck?"

"We won't need it," Kemridge said grimly. "It's not a matter of luck at all. It's brains—brains and sweat."

"Very well," Plorvash said. "This is what you're here to prove. It ought to be amusing, in any event."

Statisticians have no records on the subject, but it is an observed phenomenon that the most serious differences of opinion generally originate in bars. It had been in a bar at Forty-sixth and Sixth that Justin Marner had ill-advisedly had words with a visiting Domerangi, a month before, and it had been in the same bar that the train of events which had brought the two Earthmen to Domerang V had originated.

It had been a simple altercation, at first. Marner had been reflectively sipping a whiskey sour, and Kemridge, seated to his left with his long legs uncomfortably scrunched up, had been toying with a double scotch. The Domerangi had entered the bar with a characteristically ponderous stride.

Marner and Kemridge had glanced up in some surprise. Even though contact with Domerang V had been made more than a century before, Domerangi were still rare sights in New York. They recognized this one, though—he was attached to the Domerangi Consulate on Sixty-sixth and Third, and they had had dealings with him in the matter of some circuit alignments for the building's lighting system. Domerangi, with their extraordinary peripheral vision, prefer subdued, indirect lighting. and Marner and Kemridge had designed the lighting-plot for the Consulate.

The Domerangi spotted them immediately, and eased its

bulk onto the stool next to them. "Ah, the two clever engineers," the alien rumbled. "You remember me, of course?"

"Yes," Marner said quickly. "We did a lighting job for you last year. How's it working out?"

"As well as could be expected," the Domerangi said. He waved toward the bartender. "Barkeep! Two beers, please."

"What do you mean by that?" Kemridge demanded, as the beers arrived.

"Just one moment, please," said the alien. He curled two tentacles gently around the beers and poured one into each of the two feeding-mouths at the sides of his face. He belched his satisfaction. "Marvelous liquid, your beer. The one point where Earth is clearly superior to Domerang is in brewing."

"To get back to the lights—" Kemridge prodded.

"Oh, yes," the alien said. "The lights. Well, they're a pretty fair job—as good as we could have hoped for, from a second-rate technology."

"Now hold on a minute!" Marner said hotly, and that was how it started.

"I wish we'd kept our mouths shut," Marner said glumly, after a few moments of introspection. He stared balefully at the spotless ceiling of the hotel room in which the Domerangi had installed them.

Kemridge whirled savagely and glared down at the smaller man. "Listen, Justin; we're here, and we're going to show them up and go home rich and famous. Got that?"

"Okay," Marner said. He ran a finger along his thin lower lip. "I'm sorry I keep popping off like this. But it does seem screwy to have gone to this extent just to prove a point that came up in a barroom debate."

"I know," Kemridge said lightly. "But we wouldn't have come here if the State Department hadn't heard about the argument and thought it needed settling. The Domerangi have been acting lordly about their technology as long as we've known them. I think it's a marvelous idea to send a couple of honest-to-christmas Terran engineers up here to show them once and for all who's got more where it counts."

"But suppose we *don't* show them?"

"We will! Between the two of us, we can match anything they throw at us—can't we? Can't we?"

Marner smiled gloomily. "Sure we can," he said without conviction. "I haven't doubted it for one minute."

"Good," Kemridge said. He walked to the door, and with a swift searching motion of his fingers found the plate that covered the door-mechanism. He unclipped it. "Look in here, for example," he said, after a moment's scrutiny. "Simple cybernetic mechanism. I don't quite figure the way this green ceramic relay down here controls the power flow, but it's nothing we couldn't dope out given a screwdriver and a half hour or so of spare time."

Marner stood on tip-toes and peered in. "Perfectly understandable gadget," he commented. "Not nearly as efficient as our kind, either."

"That's just the point," Kemridge said. "These Domerangi aren't half the sharks they think they are! Look Justin; we stipulated that we could duplicate anything they gave us, right? With our natural savvy and a little perspiration, we ought to be able to match the best gadget they test us with. If we follow through up here and those two Domerangi engineers on Earth mess up their half of the test, then we've done it. The State Department's counting on our versatility. That's all we need, Justin—cleverness!"

Marner's eyes lit up. "There's nothing to it, Dave. I'm sorry I was so pigheaded a minute ago. We'll give them the business, all right!"

He stood up a little higher, and gingerly extended a hand into the gaping servomechanism in the wall.

"What are you doing?" Kemridge asked.

"Never mind. Get on the phone and tell Plorvash that we'll be ready to get to work tomorrow. While you're doing that, I want to fool with this relay. Might as well get some practice now!" He was radiant with new-found enthusiasm.

When Plorvash arrived the following morning, the mood was still on them. They were clear-eyed, wide awake, and firmly convinced they could master any problem.

Plorvash's knock sounded heavily on the door.

"Who's there?" Marner asked loudly.

"Me," the Domerangi said. "Plorvash."

Instantly the door flew open, and the dumfounded *chargé d'affaires* was confronted with the sight of the two Earthmen still snug in their beds. He peered behind the door and in the clothes closet.

"Who opened the door?" he asked suspiciously.

Marner sat up in bed and grinned. "Try it again. Go outside and call out 'Plorvash' the way you just did."

The alien lumbered out, pulling the door shut behind him. When he was outside, he muttered his name again, and the door opened immediately. He thundered across the threshold and looked from Marner to Kemridge. "What did you do?"

"We were experimenting with the door-opener last night," Kemridge said. "And before we put it back together, we decided it might be fun to rig up a modified vocoder circuit that would open the door automatically at the sound of the syllables 'Plorvash' directed at it from outside. It works very nicely."

The alien scowled. "Ah—yes," he said unhappily. "Very clever. Now, as to the terms of this test you two are to engage in; we've prepared a fully-equipped laboratory for you in Central Sqorvik—that's a suburb not far from here—and we've set up two preliminary problems for you, as agreed. When you've dealt with those—if you've dealt with those, we'll give you a third."

"And if we *don't* deal with them successfully?"

"Why, then you'll have failed to demonstrate your ability, of course. We'll consider failure on the preliminary tasks as an immediate conclusion to the project."

"Reasonable enough," Marner said. "But just when do we *win* this thing? Do you go on giving us projects till we miss?"

"That would be the ultimate proof of your ability, wouldn't it?" Plorvash asked. "But you'll be relieved to know that we have no such plans. According to the terms of the agreement between ourselves and your government, the test-groups on each planet will be required to carry out no more than three projects." The alien's rugose lips smiled unpleasantly. "We'll consider successful completion of all three projects as ample proof of your ability."

"I don't like the way you say that," Kemridge said. "What's up your sleeve?"

"My sleeve? My sleeve? I don't believe I grasp the idiom," Plorvash said.

"Never mind. Just a curious Terran expression," said Kemridge.

There was a car waiting for them outside the hotel—a long,

low job with a pulsating flexible hood that undulated in distressing fashion.

Plorvash slid the back door open and gestured at Marner. "Get in," he said. "I'll take you to the lab to get started."

Marner looked at the alien, then at Kemridge. Kemridge nodded.

"How about one for the road?" Marner suggested.

"Eh?"

"Another idiom," he said. "I mean a *drink*. Alcoholic beverage. Stimulant of some kind. You catch?"

The alien grinned nastily. "I understand," he said. "Well enough. There's a dispensary on the next street. We don't want to rush you on this thing, anyway." He pointed to the moving roadway. "Get aboard, and we'll take a quick one."

They followed the Domerangi onto the moving strip, and a moment later found themselves in front of a curious domed structure planted just off the roadway. A gleaming sign in Domerangi proclaimed the place's nature.

"It doesn't look very cozy," Kemridge commented, as they entered. A pungent odor of ether hit their nostrils. Half a dozen Domerangi were lying on the floor, holding jointed metal tubes. As they watched, Plorvash clambered down and sprawled out on his back.

"Come, join me," he urged. "Have a drink." He reached for a tube that slithered across the floor towards him, and fitted it into his left feeding mouth.

"This is a bar?" Kemridge asked quietly. "It looks more like the emergency ward of a hospital."

Plorvash finished drinking and stood up, wiping a few drops of green liquid from his jaw. "Good," he said. "It's not beer, but it's good stuff. I thought you two wanted to drink?"

Marner sniffed the ether-laden air in dismay and shook his head. "We're—not—thirsty," he said slowly. "It takes time to get used to alien customs, I suppose."

"I suppose so," Plorvash agreed. "Very well, then. Let's go to the lab, shall we?"

The laboratory was, indeed, a sumptuous place. The two Earthmen stood at the entrance to the monstrous room and marveled visibly.

"We're impressed," Marner said finally to the Domerangi.

"We want to give you every opportunity to succeed," Plorvash said. "This is just as important for us as it is for you."

Marner took two or three steps into the lab and glanced around. To the left, an enormous oscilloscope wiggled greenly at him; the right-hand wall was bristling with elaborate servomechanisms of all descriptions. The far wall was a gigantic tool-chest, and workbenches were spotted here and there. The lighting—indirect, of course—was bright and eye-easing. It was the sort of research setup a sane engineer rarely bothers even to dream of.

"You're making it too easy for us," said Kemridge. "It can't be hard to pull off miracles in a lab like this."

"We are honest people," Plorvash said sententiously. "If you can meet our tests, we'll allow that you're better than we are. *If* you can, that is. If you fail, it can't be blamed on poor working conditions."

"Fair enough," Kemridge said. "When are you ready to start?"

"Immediately." He reached into the bagging folds of his sash and withdrew a small plastic bubble, about four inches long, containing a creamy-white fluid. He held it out so they could both see it.

"This is a depilator," Plorvash said. He squeezed a few drops out of the bubble into the spoon-like end of one tentacle and rubbed the liquid over the thick, heavy red beard that sprouted on his lower jaw. A streak of beard came away as he rubbed. "It is very useful," said the Domerangi. He handed the bubble to Marner. "Duplicate it."

"But we're engineers, not chemists," Marner protested.

"Never mind, Justin." Kemridge turned to the alien. "Very well, that's the first problem. Suppose you give us the second one at the same time, just to make things more convenient. That way we'll each have one to work on."

The alien frowned. "You want to work on two projects at once? All right." He turned, strode out, and returned a few moments later, carrying something that looked like a large moustrap inside a cage. He handed it to Kemridge.

"We use this to catch small housepests," Plorvash explained. "It's a self-baiting trap. Most of our housepests are color-sensitive, and this trap flashes colors as a lure. For example, it does this to trap vorks"—he depressed a lever in the back, and the trap glowed a lambent green—"and this to catch flaibs."

Another lever went down, and the trap radiated warm purple. An unmistakable odor of rotting vegetation emanated from it as well.

"It is, as you see, most versatile," the alien went on. "We've supplied you with an ample number of vermin of different sorts—they're at the back of the lab, in those cages—and you ought to be able to rig a trap to duplicate this one. At least, I hope you can."

"Is this all?" Kemridge asked.

Plorvash nodded. "You can have all the time you need. That was the agreement."

"Exactly," Kemridge said. "We'll let you know when we've gotten somewhere."

"Fine," said Plorvash.

After he had left, Marner squeezed a couple of drops of the depilatory out onto the palm of his hand. It stung, and he immediately shook it off.

"Better not fool with that till we've run an analysis," Kemridge suggested. "If it's potent enough to remove Domerangi beards, it'll probably be good skin-dissolver for Earthmen. Those babies have tough hides."

Marner rubbed his hand clean hastily. "What do you think of the deal in general?"

"Pretty soft," Kemridge said. "It shouldn't take more than a week to knock off both these things, barring complications. Seems to me they could pick tougher projects than these."

"Wait till the final one," said Marner. "These are just warmups."

Four days later, when the two projects had been completed, Marner called Plorvash from the lab.

The alien's bulky form filled the screen. "Hello," the Domerangi said mildly. "What's new?"

"We've finished the job," Marner said.

"Both of them?"

"Both," the Earthman said.

"I'll be right over."

Plorvash strode into the lab about fifteen minutes later, and the two Earthmen, who were busy with the animal-cages at the back of the lab, waved in greeting.

"Stay right where you are," Kemridge called loudly. He

reached up, pressed a switch, and thirty cages clanged open at once.

As a horde of Domerangi vermin came bounding, slithering, crawling, and rolling across the floor toward Plorvash, the alien leaped back in dismay. "What kind of trick is this?"

"Don't worry," Marner said, from the remotest corner of the lab. "It'll all be over in a second."

The animals ignored Plorvash, and to his surprise they made a bee-line for a complex, humming arrangement of gears and levers behind the door. As they approached, it began flashing a series of colors, emanating strange odors, and making curious clicking noises. When the horde drew closer, jointed arms suddenly sprang out and scooped them wholesale into a hopper that gaped open at floor level. Within a moment, they were all safely inside.

Marner came across the lab, followed by Kemridge. "We've improved on your model," he explained. "We've built a better flaib-trap. It catches the whole mess at once. Your version can deal with only one species at a time."

Plorvash gulped resoundingly. "Very nice," he said. "Quite remarkable, in fact."

"We have the schematics in our room," said Kemridge. "The trap may have some commercial value on Domerang."

"Probably," Plorvash admitted. "How'd you do on the depilator?"

"That was easy," Marner said. "With the setup you gave us, chemical analysis was a snap. Only I'm afraid we've improved on the original model there too."

"What do you mean?"

Marner rubbed the side of his face uneasily. "I tried our stuff on myself, couple of days ago, and my face is still smooth as a baby's. The effect seems to be permanent."

"You'll submit samples, of course," Plorvash said. "But I think it's fairly safe to assume that you've passed through the first two projects—ah—reasonably well. Curiously, your counterparts on Earth also did well on their preliminaries. I've been in contact with our Consul in New York—I believe you know the man—and he says the two Domerangi now being tested responded successfully to their first two projects."

"Glad to hear it," Marner lied. "But the third one tells the tale, doesn't it?"

"Exactly," Plorvash agreed. "Let's have that one now, shall we?"

Five minutes later, Marner and Kemridge found themselves staring down at a complicated nest of glittering relays and tubes which seemed to power an arrangement of pistons and rods. Plorvash had carried it in with the utmost delicacy and had ensconced it on a workbench in the middle of the lab.

"What is it?" Marner asked.

"You'll see," promised the alien. He fumbled in the back of the machine, drew forth a cord, and plugged it into a wall socket. A small tube in the heart of the machine glowed cherry red, and a moment later the pistons began to move, first slowly, then more rapidly. After a while it was humming away at an even, steady clip, pistons barreling back and forth in purposeless but inexorable motion.

Kemridge bent and peered as close to the workings of the gadget as he dared. Finally he looked up. "So?" he asked. "It's an engine. What of it?"

"It's a very special kind of engine," Plorvash said. "Suppose you take the plug out."

The Earthman worked the plug from its socket, turned, and looked at the machine for a long moment. Then the plug dropped from his limp hand and skittered to the floor.

"It—doesn't stop going, does it?" Kemridge asked quietly. "The pistons keep on moving."

"This is our power source," Plorvash said smugly. "We use them in vehicles and other such things. Can you build one? It's the third problem."

"We'll give it a try," Marner said. "We'll do it."

"I'll be most interested in the results," Plorvash said. "And now, I must bid you a good day."

"Sure," Marner said weakly. "Cheers."

They watched the broad-beamed alien waddle gravely out of the laboratory, waited till the door was closed, and glanced at the machine.

It was still moving.

Marner licked his lips and cocked an eye at Kemridge. "Dave," he said darkly, "can we build a perpetual-motion machine?"

The machine worked just as well plugged in or unplugged,

once it had tapped some power source to begin with. The pistons threaded ceaselessly up and down. The basic components of the things seemed simple enough.

"The first step to take," Marner said, "is to shut the damned thing off so we can get a look at its innards."

"How do we do that?"

"By reversing the power source, I suppose. Feed a negative pulse through that power-input, and that ought to do it. We'll have to reverse the polarity of the signal."

Half an hour's hard work with screwdriver and solder had done that. They plugged the scrambled cord into the socket, and the machine coughed twice and subsided.

"Okay," Marner said, rubbing his hands with an enthusiasm he did not quite feel. "Let's dig this baby apart and find out what makes it tick." He turned and stared meaningfully at Kemridge. "And let's adopt this as a working credo, Dave: inasmuch as the Domerangi have already built this thing, it's *not* impossible. Okay?"

"That seems to be the only basis we can approach it on," Kemridge agreed.

They huddled around the device, staring at the workings. Marner reached down and pointed at a part. "This thing is something like a tuned-plate feedback oscillator," he observed. "And I'll bet we've almost got a thyratron tube over here. Their technology's a good approximation of ours. In fact, the whole thing's within our grasp, technically."

"Hmm. And the result is a closed regenerative system with positive feedback," Kemridge said dizzily. "Infinite energy, going round and round the cycle. If you draw off a hundred watts or so—well, infinitely minus a hundred is still infinity!"

"True enough," Marner admitted. He wiped a gleaming bead of perspiration from his forehead. "Dave, we're going to have to puzzle this thing out from scratch. And we don't dare fail."

He reached doggedly for a screwdriver.

"Remember our motto," he muttered. "We'll use our natural savvy and a little perspiration, and we ought to do it."

Three weeks later, they had come up with their first trial model—which wobbled along for half an hour, then gave up.

And a month after that, they had a machine that didn't give up.

Hesitantly, they sent for Plorvash.

"There it is," Marner said, pointing to the bizarre thing that stood next to the original model. Both machines were humming blithely, plugs dangling from the sockets.

"It works?" Plorvash asked, paling.

"It hasn't stopped yet," Marner said. There were heavy rings under his eyes, and his usually plump face was drawn, with the skin tight over his cheekbones. It had been two months of almost constant strain, and both Earthmen showed it.

"It works, eh?" Plorvash asked. "How?"

"A rather complex hyperspace function," Kemridge said. "I don't want to bother explaining it now—you'll find it all in our report—but it was quite a stunt in topology. We couldn't actually duplicate your model, but we achieved the same effect, which fulfills the terms of the agreement."

"All a matter of response to challenge," said Marner. "We didn't think we could to it, until we *had* to—so we did."

"I didn't think you could do it either," Plorvash said hoarsely. He walked over and examined the machine closely. "It works, you say? Honestly, now?" His voice was strained.

"Of course," Marner said indignantly.

"We have just one question," said Kemridge. He pointed to a small black rectangular box buried deep in a maze of circuitry in the original model. "That thing down there—it nearly threw us. We couldn't get it open to examine it, and so we had to bypass it and substitute a new system for it. What in blazes is it?"

Plorvash wheeled solidly around to face them. "That," he said, in a strangled voice, "is the power source. It's a miniature photoelectric amplifier that should keep the model running for—oh, another two weeks or so. Then the jig would have been up."

"How's that?" Marner asked, startled.

"It's time to explain something to you," the alien said wearily. "*We don't have any perpetual-motion machines.* You've been cruelly hoaxed into inventing one for us. It's dastardly, but we didn't really think you were going to do it. It took some of our best minds to rig up the model we gave you, you know."

Marner drew up a lab stool and sat down limply, white-faced. Kemridge remained standing, his features blank with

disbelief. Finally Marner said, "You mean we invented the thing—and you didn't—you—"

Plorvash nodded. "I'm just as astonished as you are," he said. He reached for a lab stool himself and sat down. It groaned under his weight.

Kemridge recovered first. "Well," he said after a moment of silence, "now that it's over, we'll take our machine and go back to Earth. This invalidates the contest, of course."

"I'm afraid you can't do that," Plorvash said. "By a statute enacted some seven hundred years ago, any research done in a Domerangi government lab is automatically government property. Which means, of course, that we'll have to confiscate your—ahem—project."

"That's out of the question!" Marner said hotly.

"And, furthermore," Plorvash said smoothly, "we intend to confiscate *you*, too. We'd like you to stay and show us how to build our machines."

"This is cause for war," Kemridge said. "Earth won't let you get away with this—this kidnapping!"

"Possibly not," Plorvash said. "But, in view of the way things have turned out, it's the sanest thing we can do. And I *don't* think Earth will go to war over you."

"We demand to see our Consul," said Marner.

"Very well," Plorvash agreed. "It's within your rights, I suppose."

The Earth Consul was a white-haired, sturdy gentleman named Culbertson, who arrived on the scene later that day.

"This is very embarrassing for all of us," the Consul said when he was apprised of the situation. He ran his hands nervously down his traditional pin-striped trousers, adjusting the crease.

"You can get us out of it, of course," Marner said. "That machine is our property, and they have no right to keep us prisoners here to operate it, do they?"

"No, of course not," Culbertson agreed. "Not by all human laws. But the fact remains, unfortunately, that according to *their* laws, they have every right to your invention. And by the treaty of—ah—2716, waiving extra-territorial sovereignty, Earthmen on Domerang are subject to Domerangi laws, and vice versa." He spread his hands in a gesture of frustration.

"You mean we're stuck here," Marner said bluntly. He shut

his eyes, remembering the nightmare that was the Domerangi equivalent of a bar, thinking of the morbid prospect of spending the rest of his life on this unappetizing planet, all because of some insane dare. "Go on—tell us the truth."

The Consul put the palms of his hands together delicately. "We intend to make every effort to get you off, of course—naturally so, since we owe a very great debt to you two. You realize that you've upheld Earth's pride throughout the universe."

"Lot of good it did us," Marner said.

"Nevertheless," said the Consul, "we feel anxious to make amends for the whole unhappy incident. I can assure you that we'll do everything in our power to make your stay here as pleasant and as restful as—"

"Listen, Culbertson," Kemridge said grimly, "we don't want a vacation here, not even with dancing-girls twenty-four hours a day and soft violins in the background. *We don't like it here.* We want to go home. You people got us into this—now get us out."

The Consul grew even more unhappy-looking. "I wish you wouldn't put it that way," he said. "We'll do all we can." He paused for a moment, deep in thought, and said, "There's one factor in the case that we haven't explored."

"What's that?" Marner asked uneasily.

"Remember the two Domerangi engineers who went to Earth on the other leg of this hookup?" The Consul glanced around the lab. "Is this place wired anywhere?"

"I don't think so," Kemridge said. "You can speak freely. What do they have to do with us?"

"There's a slim chance for you," the Consul said, lowering his voice. "I've been in touch with authorities on Earth, and they've been keeping me informed of the progress of the two Domerangi. As you know, they got through their first two projects as easily as you did."

The two Earthmen nodded impatiently.

The old diplomat smiled his apologies. "I hate to admit this, but it seems the people at the Earth end of this deal had much the same idea the Domerangi did."

"Perpetual motion, you mean?"

"Not quite," Culbertson said. "They rigged up a phony anti-gravity machine, and told the Domerangi to duplicate it. Just as was done here. Our psychologies must be similar."

"And what happened?" Marner asked.

"Nothing, yet," the Consul said sadly. "But they're still working on it, I'm told. If they're as clever as they say they are, they ought to hit it sooner or later. You'll just have to be patient and sweat it out. We'll see to it that you're well taken care of in the meantime, of course, and—"

"I don't get it. What does that have to do with us?" Marner demanded.

"If they keep at it," said the Consul, "they'll invent it eventually. And then, I think, we can try to arrange a sort of even-up exchange."

Marner scowled. "That may take years. It may take forever. They may *never* discover a workable antigrav! Then what about us?"

The Consul shrugged mildly.

A curious gleam twinkled in Kemridge's eye. He turned to Marner and said, "Justin—do you know anything about tensor applications and gravitational fields?"

"What are you driving at?" Marner asked.

"We've got an ideal lab setup here. And I'm sure those two Domerangi down there wouldn't mind taking the credit for someone else's antigrav, if they were approached properly—eh?"

"You mean," said the Consul, "you'd build the machine, and smuggle it to Earth so we could slip it to the Domerangi and use that as a talking-point for a trade and—"

He stopped, seeing that no one was listening to him, and looked around. Marner and Kemridge were at the far end of the lab, scribbling equations feverishly.

THE OVERLORD'S THUMB

There will be worlds of underdeveloped beings, too—primitive civilizations of far space, which will regard us with awe and superstitious reverence. Those primitives of the world beyond will have laws and customs of their own, which they'll defend vigorously in the face of the newcomers from Earth. The results will be moral conflicts for our future-era Peace Corps equivalents. Caught between the ethical substructure of our own society and the desire to show respect for alien mores, they'll wrestle with such dilemmas as this one—

The night before, the sun had gone down blood-red, and Colonel John Devall had slept poorly because of it. The atmosphere on Markin was not normally conducive to blood-red sunsets, though they did happen occasionally on evenings when the blue of sunlight was scattered particularly well. The Marks connected red sunsets with approaching trouble. Colonel Devall, who headed the Terran cultural and military mission to Markin, was more cultural than military himself, and so he was willing to accept the Markin belief that the sunset was a premonition of conflict.

He was a tall man, well-made and erect in bearing, with the sharp bright eyes and crisp manner of the military man. He successfully tried to project an appearance of authoritative officerhood, and his men respected and feared the image he showed them.

His degree was in anthropology. The military education was an afterthought, but a shrewd one; it had brought him command of the Markin outpost. The department of Extraterrestrial Affairs insisted that all missions to relatively primitive alien worlds be staffed and headed by military men—and, Devall reasoned, so long as I keep up the outward show, who's to know that I'm not the tough soldier they think I am? Markin was a peaceful enough world. The natives were intelligent, fairly highly advanced culturally if not technologically, easily dealt with on a rational being-to-being basis.

Which explains why Devall slept badly the night of the red

sun. Despite his elegant posture and comportment, he regarded himself as essentially a bookish, unmilitary man. He had some doubts as to his own possible behavior in an unforeseen time of crisis. The false front of his officerhood might well crumble away under stress, and he knew it.

He dozed off finally, toward morning, having kicked the covers to the floor and twisted the sheet into crumpled confusion. It was a warmish night—most of them were, on Markin—but he felt chilled.

He woke late, only a few minutes before officers' mess, and dressed hurriedly in order to get there on time. As commanding officer, of course, he had the privilege of sleeping as late as he pleased—but getting up with the others was part of the mask Devall imposed on himself. He donned the light summer uniform, slapped depilator hastily on his tanned face, hooked on his formal blaster and belt, and signaled to his orderly that he was awake and ready.

The Terran enclave covered ten acres, half an hour's drive from one of the largest Markin villages. An idling jeep waited outside Devall's small private dome, and he climbed in, nodding curtly at the orderly.

"Morning, Harris."

"Good morning, sir. Sleep well?"

It was a ritual by now. "Very well," Devall responded automatically, as the jeep's turbos thrummed once and sent the little car humming across the compound to the mess hall. Clipped to the seat next to Devall was his daily morning program-sheet, prepared for him by the staffman-of-the-day while he slept. This morning's sheet was signed by Dudley, a major of formidable efficiency—Space Service through and through, a Military Wing career man and nothing else. Devall scanned the assignments for the morning, neatly written out in Dudley's crabbed hand.

Kelly, Dorfman, Mellors, Steber on Linguistic Detail, as usual. Same assignment as yesterday, in town.

Haskell on medic duty. Blood samples; urinalysis.

Matsuoko to maintenance staff (through Wednesday).

Jolli on zoo detail.

Leonards, Meyer, Rodriguez on assigned botanical field trip, two days. Extra jeep assigned for specimen collection.

Devall scanned the rest of the list, but, as expected, Dudley had done a perfect job of deploying the men where they would

be most useful and most happy. Devall thought briefly about Leonards, on the botanical field trip. A two-day trip might take him through the dangerous rain-forest to the south; Devall felt a faint flicker of worry. The boy was his nephew, his sister's son—a reasonably competent journeyman botanist with the gold bar still untarnished on his shoulder. This was the boy's first commission; he had been assigned to Devall's unit at random, as a new man. Devall had concealed his relationship with Leonards from the other men, knowing it might make things awkward for the boy, but he still felt a protective urge.

Hell, the kid can take care of himself, Devall thought, and scribbled his initials at the bottom of the sheet and clipped it back in place; it would be posted now, while the men were cleaning their quarters and the officers ate, and by 0900 everyone would be out on his day's assignment. There was so much to do, Devall thought, and so little time to do it. There were so many worlds—

He quitted the jeep and entered the mess hall. Officers' mess was a small well-lit alcove to the left of the main hall; as Devall entered he saw seven men standing stiffly at attention, waiting for him.

He knew they hadn't been standing that way all morning; they had snapped to attention only when their lookout—probably Second Lieutenant Leonards, the youngest—had warned them he was coming.

Well, he thought, it doesn't matter much. As long as appearance is preserved. The form.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said crisply, and took his place at the head of the table.

For a while it looked as if it were going to turn out a pretty good day. The sun rose in a cloudless sky, and the thermometer tacked to the enclave flagstaff registered 93 degrees. When Markin got hot, it got *hot*. By noon, Devall knew by now, they could expect something like 110 in the shade—and then, a slow, steady decline into the low eighties by midnight.

The botanical crew departed on time, rumbling out of camp in its two jeeps, and Devall stood for a moment on the mess hall steps watching them go, watching the other men head to their assigned posts. Stubble-faced Sergeant Jolli saluted him as he trotted across the compound to the zoo, where he would tend the little menagerie of Markin wildlife the expedition

would bring back to Earth at termination. Wiry little Matsuoko passed by, dragging a carpenter's kit. The linguistic team climbed into its jeep and drove off toward town, where it would continue its studies in the Markin tongue.

They were all busy. The expedition had been on Markin just four months; eight months were left of their time. Unless an extension of stay came through, they'd pack up and return to Earth for six months of furlough-cum-report-session, and then it would be on to some other world for another year of residence.

Devall was not looking forward to leaving Markin. It was a pleasant world, if a little on the hot side, and there was no way of knowing what the *next* world would be like. A frigid ball of frozen methane, perhaps, where they would spend their year bundled into Valdez breathing-suits and trying to make contact with some species of intelligent ammonia-breathing molluscs. Better the devil we know, Devall felt.

But he had to keep moving on. This was his eleventh world, and there would be more to come. Earth had barely enough qualified survey teams to cover ten thousand worlds half-adequately, and life abounded on ten *million*. He would retain whichever members of the current team satisfied him by their performance, replace those who didn't fit in, and would go off to his next job eight months from now.

He turned on the office fan and took down the logbook; unfastening the binder, he slipped the first blank sheet into the autotype. For once he avoided his standard blunder; he cleared his throat *before* switching on the autotype, thereby sparing the machine its customary difficulties in finding a verbal equivalent for his *Br-ghhumph!*

The guidelight glowed a soft red. Devall said, "Fourth April, two-seven-ought-five. Colonel John F. Devall recording. One hundred nineteenth day of our stay on Markin, World 7 of System 1106-sub-a.

"Temperature, 93 at 0900; wind gentle, southerly—"

He went on at considerable length, as he did each morning. Finishing off the required details, he gathered up the sheaf of specialty-reports that had been left at his door the night before, and began to read abstracts into the log; the autotype clattered merrily, and a machine somewhere in the basement of the towering E-T Affairs Building in Rio de Janeiro was reproducing his words as the subradio hookup transmitted them.

It was dull work; Devall often wondered whether he might have been ultimately happier doing simple anthropological field work, as he had once done, instead of taking on the onerous burden of routine that an administrative post entailed. *But someone has to shoulder the burden*, he thought.

Earthman's burden. We're the most advanced race; we help the others. But no one twists our arms to come out to these worlds and share what we have. Call it an inner compulsion.

He intended to work until noon; in the afternoon a Markin high priest was coming to the enclave to see him, and the interview would probably take almost till sundown. But about 1100 he was interrupted suddenly by the sound of jeeps unexpectedly entering the compound, and he heard the clamor of voices—both Terran voices and alien ones.

A fearful argument seemed to be in progress, but the group was too far away and Devall's knowledge of Markin too uncertain for him to be able to tell what was causing the rumpus. In some annoyance he snapped off the autotype, rose from his chair, and peered out the window into the yard.

Two jeeps had drawn up—the botanical crew, gone less than two hours. Four natives surrounded the three Earthmen. Two of the natives clutched barbed spears; a third was a woman, the fourth an old man. They were all protesting hotly over something.

Devall scowled; from the pale, tense, unhappy faces of the men in the jeep, he could tell something was very wrong. That blood-red sunset had foretold accurately, he thought, as he dashed down the steps from his study.

Seven pairs of eyes focussed on him as he strode toward the group: eight glittering alien eyes, warmly golden, and six shifting, uneasy Terran eyes.

"What's going on out here?" Devall demanded.

The aliens set up an immediate babble of noise, chattering away like a quartet of squirrels. Devall had never seen any of them behaving this way before.

"*Quiet!*" he roared.

In the silence that followed he said very softly, "Lieutenant Leonards, can you tell me exactly what all this fuss is about?"

The boy looked very frightened; his jaws were stiffly clenched, his lips bloodless. "Y-yes, sir," he said stammeringly. "Begging your pardon, sir. I seem to have killed an alien."

In the relative privacy of his office, Devall faced them all again—Leonards, sitting very quietly staring at his gleaming boots, Meyer and Rodriguez, who had accompanied him on the ill-starred botanizing journey. The aliens were outside; there was time to calm them down later.

"Okay," Devall said. "Leonards, I want you to repeat the story, exactly as you just told it to me, and I'll get it down on the autotype. Start talking when I point to you."

He switched on the autotype and said, "Testimony of Second Lieutenant Paul Leonards, Botanist, delivered in presence of commanding officer on 4 April 2705." He jabbed a forefinger at Leonards.

The boy's face looked waxy; beads of sweat dotted his pale vein-traced forehead, and his blond hair was tangled and twisted. He clamped his lips together in an agonized grimace, scratched the back of one hand, and finally said, "Well, we left the enclave about 0900 this morning, bound south and westerly on a tour of the outlying regions. Our purpose was to collect botanical specimens. I—was in charge of the group, which also included Sergeants Meyer and Rodriguez."

He paused. "We—we accomplished little in the first half hour; this immediate area had already been thoroughly covered by us anyway. But about 0945 Meyer noticed a heavily wooded area not far to the left of the main road, and called it to my attention. I suggested we stop and investigate. It was impossible to penetrate the wooded area in our jeeps, so we proceeded on foot. I left Rodriguez to keep watch over our gear while we were gone.

"We made our way through a close-packed stand of deciduous angiosperm trees of a species we had already studied, and found ourselves in a secluded area of natural growth, including several species which we could see were previously uncatalogued. We found one in particular—a shrub consisting of a single thick, succulent green stalk perhaps four feet high, topped by a huge gold and green composite flower head. We filmed it in detail, took scent samples, pollen prints, and removed several leaves."

Devall broke in suddenly. "You didn't pick the flower itself? Devall speaking."

"Of course not. It was the only specimen in the vicinity, and it's not our practice to destroy single specimens for the sake of collecting. But I did remove several leaves from the stalk. And

the moment I did that, a native sprang at me from behind a thick clump of ferns.

"He was armed with one of those notched spears. Meyer saw him first and yelled, and I jumped back just as the alien came charging forward with his spear. I managed to deflect the spear with the outside of my arm and was not hurt. The alien fell back a few feet and shouted something at me in his language, which I don't understand too well as yet. Then he raised his spear and menaced me with it. I was carrying the standard-issue radial blaster. I drew it and ordered him in his own language to lower his spear, that we meant no harm. He ignored me and charged a second time. I fired in self-defense, trying to destroy the spear or at worst wound his arm, but he spun round to take the full force of the charge, and died instantly." Leonards shrugged. "That's about it, sir. We came back here at once."

"Umm. Devall speaking. Sergeant Meyer, would you say this account is substantially true?"

Meyer was a thin-faced, dark-haired man who was usually smiling, but he wasn't smiling now. "This is Sergeant Meyer. I'd say that Lieutenant Leonards told the story substantially as it occurred. Except that the alien didn't seem overly fierce despite his actions, in my opinion. I myself thought he was bluffing both times he charged, and I was a little surprised when Lieutenant Leonards shot him. That's all, sir."

Frowning, the Colonel said, "Devall speaking. This has been testimony in the matter of the alien killed by Lieutenant Leonards." He snapped off the autotype, stood up, and leaned forward across the desk, staring sternly at the trio of young botanists facing him.

"Sergeant Rodriguez, since you weren't present at the actual incident I'll consider you relieved of all responsibility in this matter, and your testimony won't be required. Report to Major Dudley for reassignment for the remainder of the week."

"Thank you, sir." Rodriguez saluted, grinned gratefully, and was gone.

"As for you two, though," Devall said heavily, "you'll both have to be confined to base pending the outcome of the affair. I don't need to tell you how serious this can be, whether the killing was in self-defense or not. Plenty of peoples don't understand the concept of self-defense." He moistened his suddenly dry lips. "I don't anticipate too many complications

growing out of this. But these are alien people on an alien world, and their behavior is never certain."

He glanced at Leonards. "Lieutenant, I'll have to ask for your own safety that you remain in your quarters until further notice."

"Yes, sir. Is this to be considered arrest?"

"Not yet," Devall said. "Meyer, attach yourself to the maintenance platoon for the remainder of the day. We'll probably need your testimony again before this business is finished. Dismissed, both of you."

When they were gone, Devall sank back limply in his web-foam chair and stared at his fingertips. His hands were quivering as if they had a life of their own.

John F. Devall, PhD. Anthropology Columbia '82, commissioned Space Service Military Wing '87, and now you're in trouble for the first time.

How are you going to handle it, Jack? he asked himself. *Can you prove that that silver eagle really belongs on your shoulder?*

He was sweating. He felt very tired. He shut his eyes for a moment, opened them, and said into the intercom, "Send in the Marks."

Five of them entered, made ceremonial bows, and ranged themselves nervously along the far wall as if they were firing-squad candidates. Accompanying them came Steber of the linguistics team, hastily recalled from town to serve as an interpreter for Devall. The Colonel's knowledge of Markin was adequate but sketchy; he wanted Steber around in case any fine points had to be dealt with in detail.

The Marks were humanoid in structure, simian in ancestry, which should have made them close kin to the Terrans in general physiological structure. They weren't. Their skin was a rough, coarse, pebble-grained affair, dark-toned, running to muddy browns and occasional deep purples. Their jaws had somehow acquired a reptilian hinge in the course of evolution, which left them practically chinless but capable of swallowing food in huge lumps that would strangle an Earthman. Their eyes, liquid gold in color, were set wide in their heads, allowing enormous peripheral vision; their noses were flat buttons, in some cases barely perceptible bumps above the nostrils.

Devall saw two younger men, obviously warriors; they had

left their weapons outside, but their jaws jutted belligerently and the darker of the pair had virtually dislocated his jaw in rage. The woman looked like all the Mark women, shapeless and weary behind her shabby cloak of furs. The remaining pair were priests, one old, one *very* old. It was this ancient to whom Devall addressed his first remarks.

"I'm sorry that our meeting this afternoon has to be one of sorrow. I had been looking forward to a pleasant talk. But it's not always possible to predict what lies ahead."

"Death lay ahead for him who was killed," the old priest said in the dry, high-pitched tone of voice that Devall knew implied anger and scorn.

The woman let out a sudden wild ululation, half a dozen wailing words jammed together so rapidly Devall could not translate them. "What did she say?" he asked Steber.

The interpreter flattened his palms together thoughtfully. "She's the woman of the man who was killed. She was—demanding revenge," he said in English.

Apparently the two young warriors were friends of the dead man. Devall's eyes scanned the five hostile alien faces. "This is a highly regrettable incident," he said in Markin. "But I trust it won't affect the warm relationship between Earthman and Markin that has prevailed so far. This misunderstanding—"

"Blood must be atoned," said the smaller and less impressively garbed of the two priests. He was probably the local priest, Devall thought, and he was probably happy to have his superior on hand to back him up.

The Colonel flicked the sweat from his forehead. "The young man who committed the act will certainly be disciplined. Of course you realize that a killing in self-defence cannot be regarded as murder, but I admit the young man did act unwisely and will suffer the consequences." It didn't sound too satisfying to Devall, and, indeed, the aliens hardly seemed impressed.

The high priest uttered two short, sharp syllables. They were not words in Devall's vocabulary, and he looked over at Steber in appeal.

"He said Leonards was trespassing on sacred ground. He said the crime they're angry about is not murder but blasphemy."

Despite the heat, Devall felt a sudden chill. *Not . . . murder? This is going to be complicated*, he realized gloomily.

To the priest he said, "Does this change the essential nature

of the case? He'll still be punished by us for his action, which can't be condoned."

"You may punish him for murder, if you so choose," the high priest said, speaking very slowly, so Devall would understand each word. The widow emitted some highly terrestrial-sounding sobs: the young men glowered stolidly. "Murder is not our concern," the high priest went on. "He has taken life; life belongs to Them, and They withdraw it whenever They see fit, by whatever means They care to employ. But he has also desecrated a sacred flower on sacred ground. These are serious crimes, to us. Added to this he has shed the blood of a Guardian, on sacred ground. We ask you to turn him over to us for trial by a priestly court on this double charge of blasphemy. Afterwards, perhaps, you may try him by your own laws, for whichever one of them he has broken."

For an instant all Devall saw was the old priest's implacable leathery face; then he turned and caught the expression of white-faced astonishment and dismay Steber displayed.

It took several seconds for the high priest's words to sink in, and several more before Devall came to stunned realization of the implications. *They want to try an Earthman*, he thought numbly. *By their own law. In their own court. And mete out their own punishment.*

This had abruptly ceased being a mere local incident, an affair to clean up, note in the log, and forget. It was no longer a matter of simple reparations for the accidental killing of an alien.

Now, thought Devall dully, it was a matter of galactic importance. And he was the man who had to make all the decisions.

He visited Leonards that evening, after the meal. By that time everyone in the camp knew what had happened, though Devall had ordered Steber to keep quiet about the alien demand to try Leonards themselves.

The boy looked up as Devall entered his room, and managed a soggy salute.

"At ease, Lieutenant." Devall sat on the edge of Leonards' bed and squinted up at him. "Son, you're in very hot water now."

"Sir, I—"

"I know. You didn't mean to pluck leaves off the sacred

bramble-bush, and you couldn't help shooting down the native who attacked you. And if this business were as simple as all that, I'd reprimand you for hotheadedness and let it go at that. But—"

"But what, sir?"

Devall scowled and forced himself to face the boy squarely. "But the aliens want to try you themselves. They aren't so much concerned with the murder as they are with your double act of blasphemy. That withered old high priest wants to take you before an ecclesiastical court."

"You won't allow *that*, of course, will you, Colonel?" Leonards seemed confident that such an unthinkable thing could never happen.

"I'm not so sure, Paul," Devall said quietly, deliberately using the boy's first name.

"*What*, sir?"

"This is evidently something very serious you've committed. That high priest is calling a priestly convocation to deal with you. They'll be back here to get you tomorrow at noon, he said."

"But you wouldn't turn me over to them, sir! After all, I was on duty; I had no knowledge of the offense I was committing. Why, it's none of their business!"

"Make *them* see that," Devall said flatly. "They're aliens. They don't understand Terran legal codes. They don't *want* to hear about our laws; by *theirs*, you've blasphemed, and blasphemers must be punished. This is a law-abiding race on Markin. They're an ethically advanced society, regardless of the fact that they're not technologically advanced. Ethically they're on the same plane we are."

Leonards looked terribly pale. "You'll turn me over to them?"

Devall shrugged. "I didn't say that. But look at it from my position. I'm leader of a cultural and military mission. Our purpose is to live among these people, learn their ways, guide them as much as we can in our limited time here. We at least *try* to make a pretense of respecting their rights as individuals and as a species, you know.

"Well, now it's squarely on the line. Are we friends living among them and helping them, or are we overlords grinding them under our thumbs?"

"Sir, I'd say that was an oversimplification," Leonards remarked hesitantly.

"Maybe so. But the issue's clear enough. If we turn them down, it means we're setting up a gulf of superiority between Earth and these aliens, despite the big show we made about being brothers. And word will spread to other planets. We try to sound like friends, but our actions in the celebrated Leonards case reveal our true colors. We're arrogant, imperialistic, patronizing, and—well, do you see?"

"So you're going to turn me over to them for trial, then," the boy said quietly.

Devall shook his head. "I don't know. I haven't made up my mind yet. If I turn you over, it'll certainly set a dangerous precedent. And if I don't—I'm not sure what will happen." He shrugged. "I'm going to refer the case back to Earth. It isn't my decision to make."

But it *was* his decision to make, he thought, as he left the boys' quarters and headed stiff-legged toward the Communications shack. He was on the spot, and only he could judge the complex factors that controlled the case. Earth would almost certainly pass the buck back to him.

He was grateful for one thing, though: at least Leonards hadn't made an appeal to him on family grounds. That was cause for pride, and some relief. The fact that the boy was his nephew was something he'd have to blot rigorously from his mind until all this was over.

The signalman was busy in the back of the shack, bent over a crowded worktable. Devall waited a moment, cleared his throat gently, and said, "Mr. Rory?"

Rory turned. "Yes, Colonel?"

"Put through a subradio to Earth for me, immediately. To Director Thornton at the E-T Department. And yell for me when you've made contact."

It took twenty minutes for the subspace impulse to leap out across the light-years and find a receiver on Earth, ten minutes more for it to pass through the relay point and on to Rio. Devall returned to the shack to find the lambent green solido field in tune and waiting for him. He stepped through and discovered himself standing a few feet before the desk of the E-T Department's head. Thornton's image was sharp, but the desk

seemed to waver at the edges. Solid non-organic objects always came through poorly.

Quickly Devall reviewed the situation. Thornton sat patiently, unmoving, till the end of it; hands knotted rigidly, lean face set, he might have been a statue. Finally he commented, "unpleasant business."

"Quite."

"The alien is returning the next day, you say? I'm afraid that doesn't give us much time to hold a staff meeting and explore the problem, Colonel Devall."

"I could probably delay him a few days."

Thornton's thin lips formed a tight bloodless line. After an instant he said, "No. Take whatever action you deem necessary, Colonel. If the psychological pattern of the race is such that unfortunate consequences would result if you refused to allow them to try your man, then you must certainly turn him over. If the step can be avoided, of course, avoid it. The man must be punished in any case."

The Director smiled bleakly. "You're one of our best men, Colonel. I'm confident you'll arrive at an ultimately satisfactory resolution to this incident."

"Thank you, sir," Devall said, in a dry, uncertain voice. He nodded and stepped back out of field range. Thornton's image seemed to flicker; Devall caught one last dismissing sentence, "Report back to me when the matter is settled," and then the field died.

He stood alone in the shabby Communications shack, blinking in the sudden darkness that rolled in over him after the solidophone's intense light, and after a moment began to pick his way over the heaps of equipment and out into the compound.

It was as he had expected. Thornton was a good man, but he was a civilian appointee, subject to government control. He disliked making top-level decisions—particularly when a Colonel a few hundred light years away could be forced into making them for him.

Devall called a meeting of his top staff men for 0915 the following morning. Work at the base had all but suspended; the linguistics team was confined to the area, and Devall had ordered guards posted at all exits. Violence could rise unexpectedly among even the most placid of alien peoples; it was

impossible to predict the moment when a racial circuit-breaker would cease to function and fierce hatred burst forth.

They listened in silence to the tapes of Leonards' statements, Meyer's comments, and the brief interview Devall had had with the five aliens. Devall punched the cutoff stud and glanced rapidly round the table at his men: two majors, a captain, and a quartet of lieutenants comprised his high staff, and one of the lieutenants was confined to quarters.

"That's the picture. The old high priest is showing up here about noon for my answer. I thought I'd toss the thing open for staff discussion first."

Major Dudley asked for the floor.

He was a short, stocky man with dark flashing eyes, and on several occasions in the past had been known to disagree violently with Devall on matters of procedure. Devall had picked him for four successive trips, despite this; the Colonel believed in diversity of opinion, and Dudley was a tremendously efficient organizer as well.

"Major?"

"Sir, it doesn't seem to me that there's any question of what action to take. It's impossible to hand Leonards over to them for trial. It's—inhuman, or—unEarthlike!"

Devall frowned. "Would you elaborate, Major?"

"Simple enough. We're the race who developed the space-drive—therefore, we're the galaxy's most advanced race. I think that goes without saying."

"It does not," Devall commented. "But go ahead."

Scowling, Dudley said, "Regardless of your opinion, *sir*—the aliens we've encountered so far have all regarded us as their obvious superiors. I don't think that can be denied—and I think it can only be attributed to the fact that we *are* their superiors. Well, if we give up Leonards for trial, it cheapens our position. It makes us look weak, spineless. We—"

"You're suggesting, then," Devall broke in, "that we hold the position of overlords in the galaxy—and by yielding to our serfs, we may lose all control over them. Is this your belief, Major?" Devall glared at him.

Dudley met the Colonel's angry gaze calmly. "Basically, yes. Dammit, sir, I've tried to make you see this ever since the Hegath expedition. We're not out here in the stars to collect butterflies and squirrels! We—"

"Out of order," Devall snapped coldly. "This is a cultural

mission as well as a military one, Major—and so long as I'm in command it remains primarily cultural." He felt on the verge of losing his temper. He glanced away from Dudley and said, "Major Grey, could I hear from you?"

Grey was the ship's astrogator; on land his functions were to supervise stockade-construction and mapmaking. He was a wiry, unsmiling little man with razor-like cheekbones and ruddy skin. "I feel we have to be cautious, sir. Handing Leonards over would result in a tremendous loss of Terran prestige."

"Loss?" Dudley burst in. "It would cripple us! We'd never be able to hold our heads up honestly in the galaxy again if—"

Calmly Devall said, "Major Dudley, you've been ruled out of order. Leave this meeting, Major. I'll discuss a downward revision of your status with you later." Turning back to Grey without a further glance at Dudley he said, "You don't believe, Major, that such an action would have a correspondingly *favorable* effect on our prestige in the eyes of those worlds inclined to regard Earth uneasily?"

"That's an extremely difficult thing to determine in advance, sir."

"Very well, then." Devall rose. "Pursuant to regulations, I've brought this matter to the attention of authorities on Earth, and have also offered it for open discussion among my officers. Thanks for your time, gentlemen."

Captain Marechal said uncertainly, "Sir, won't there be any vote on our intended course of action?"

Devall grinned coldly. "As commanding officer of this base, I'll take the sole responsibility upon myself for the decision in this particular matter. It may make things easier for all of us in the consequent event of a court-martial inquiry."

It was the only way, he thought, as he waited tensely in his office for the high priest to arrive. The officers seemed firmly set against any conciliatory action, in the name of Terra's prestige. It was hardly fair for him to make them take responsibility for a decision that might be repugnant to them.

Too bad about Dudley, Devall mused. But insubordination of that sort was insufferable; Dudley would have to be dropped from the unit on their next trip out. If there is any next trip out for me, he added.

The intercom glowed gently. "Yes?"

"Alien delegation is here, sir," said the orderly.

"Don't send them in until I signal."

He strode to the window and looked out. The compound, at first glance, seemed full of aliens. Actually there were only a dozen, he realized, but they were clad in full panoply, bright red and harsh green robes, carrying spears and ornamental swords. Half a dozen enlisted men were watching them nervously from a distance, their hands ready to fly to blasters instantly if necessary.

He weighed the choices one last time.

If he handed Leonards over, the temporary anger of the aliens would be appeased—but perhaps at a long-range cost to Earth's prestige. Devall had long regarded himself as an essentially weak man with a superb instinct for camouflage—but would his yielding to the aliens imply to the universe that all Earth was weak?

On the other hand, he thought, suppose he refused to release Leonards to the aliens. Then, he would be, in essence, bringing down the overlord's thumb, letting the universe know that Earthmen were responsible only to themselves and not to the peoples of the worlds they visited.

Either way, he realized, the standing of Earthmen in the galaxy's estimation would suffer. One way, they would look like appeasing weaklings; the other, like tyrants. He remembered a definition he had once read: *melodrama is the conflict of right and wrong, tragedy the conflict of right and right*. Both sides were right here. Whichever way he turned, there would be difficulties.

And there was an additional factor: the boy. What if they executed him? Family considerations seemed absurdly picaresque at this moment, but still, to hand his own nephew over for possible execution at the hands of an alien people—

He took a deep breath, straightened his shoulders, sharpened the hard gaze of his eyes. A glance at the mirror over the bookcase told him he looked every inch the commanding officer; not a hint of the inner conflict showed through.

He depressed the intercom stud. "Send in the high priest. Let the rest of them wait outside."

The priest looked impossibly tiny and wrinkled, a gnome of a man whose skin was fantastically gullied and mazed by ex-

treme age. He wore a green turban over his hairless head—a mark of deep mourning, Devall knew.

The little alien bowed low, extending his pipestem arms behind his back at a sharp angle, indicating respect. When he straightened, his head craned back sharply, his small round eyes peering directly into Devall's.

"The jury has been selected; the trial is ready to begin. Where is the boy?"

Devall wished fleetingly he could have had the services of an interpreter for this last interview. But that was impossible; this was something he had to face alone, without help.

"The accused man is in his quarters," Devall said slowly. "First I want to ask some questions, old one."

"Ask."

"If I give you the boy to try, will there be any chance of his receiving the death penalty?"

"It is conceivable."

Devall scowled. "Can't you be a little more definite than that?"

"How can we know the verdict before the trial takes place?"

"Let that pass," Devall said, seeing he would get no concrete reply. "Where would you try him?"

"Not far from here."

"Could I be present at the trial?"

"No."

Devall had learned enough of Markin grammar by now to realize that the form of the negative the priest had employed meant literally, *I-say-no-and-mean-what-I-say*. Moistening his lips, he said, "Suppose I should refuse to turn Lieutenant Leonards over to you for trial? How could I expect you people to react?"

There was a long silence. Finally the old priest said, "Would you do such a thing?"

"I'm speaking hypothetically." (Literally, the form was, *I-speak-on-a-cloud*.)

"It would be very bad. We would be unable to purify the sacred garden for many months. Also—" he added a sentence of unfamiliar words. Devall puzzled unsuccessfully over their meaning for nearly a minute.

"What does that mean?" he asked at length. "Phrase it in different words."

"It is the name of a ritual. *I* would have to stand trial in the

Earthman's place—and I would die," the priest said simply. "Then my successor would ask you all to go away."

The office seemed very quiet; the only sounds Devall heard were the harsh breathing of the old priest and the off-key chirruping of the cricket-like insects that infested the grassplot outside the window.

Appeasement, he wondered? Or the overlord's thumb?

Suddenly there seemed no doubt at all in his mind of what he should do, and he wondered how he could have hesitated indecisively so long.

"I hear and respect your wishes, old one," he said, in a ritual formula of renunciation Steber had taught him. "The boy is yours. But can I ask a favor?"

"Ask."

"He didn't know he was offending your laws. He meant well; he's sincerely sorry for what he did. He's in your hands, now—but I want to ask mercy on his behalf. He had no way of knowing he was offending."

"This will be seen at the trial," the old priest said coldly. "If there is to be mercy, mercy will be shown him. I make no promises."

"Very well," Devall said. He reached for a pad and scrawled an order remanding Lieutenant Paul Leonards to the aliens for trial, and signed it with his full name and title. "Here. Give this to the Earthman who let you in. He'll see to it that the boy is turned over to you."

"You are wise," the priest said. He bowed elaborately and made for the door.

"Just one moment," Devall said desperately, as the alien opened the door. "Another question."

"Ask," the priest said.

"You told me you'd take his place if I refused to let you have him. Well, how about another substitute? Suppose—"

"*You* are not acceptable to us," the priest said as if reading Devall's mind, and left.

Five minutes later the Colonel glanced out his window and saw the solemn procession of aliens passing through the exit-posts and out of the compounds. In their midst, unprotesting, was Leonards. He didn't look back, and Devall was glad of it.

The Colonel stared at the row of books a long time, the frayed spools that had followed him around from world to

world, from gray Danelon to stormy Lurrin to bone-dry Korvel, and on to Hegath and M'Qualt and the others, and now to warm blue-skied Markin. Shaking his head, he turned away and dropped heavily into the foam cradle behind his desk.

He snapped on the autotype with a savage gesture and dictated a full account of his actions, from the very start until his climactic decision, and smiled bitterly; there would be a certain time-lag, but before long the autotype facsimile machine in the E-T Department's basement would start clacking, there in Rio, and Thornton would know what Devall had done.

And Thornton would be stuck with it, as Department policy henceforth.

Devall switched on the intercom and said, "I'm not to be disturbed under any circumstances. If there's anything urgent, have it sent to Major Grey; he's acting head of the base until I countermand. And if any messages come from Earth let Grey have them too."

He wondered if they'd relieve him of his command immediately, or wait until he got back to Earth. The latter, more likely; Thornton had some subtlety, if not much. But there was certain to be an inquiry, and someone's head would have to roll.

Devall shrugged and stretched back. *I did what was right*, he told himself firmly. *That's the one thing I can be sure of.*

But I hope I don't ever have to face my sister again.

He dozed, after a while, eyes half-open and slipping rapidly closed. Sleep came to him, and he welcomed it, for he was terribly tired.

He was awakened suddenly by a loud outcry. A jubilant shout from a dozen throats at once, splitting the afternoon calm. Devall felt a moment's disorientation; then, awakening rapidly, he sprang to the window and peered out.

A figure—alone and on foot—was coming through the open gateway. He wore regulation uniform, but it was dripping wet and torn in several places. His blond hair was plastered to his scalp as if he had been swimming; he looked fatigued.

Leonards.

The Colonel was nearly halfway out the front door before he realized that his uniform was in improper order. He forced himself back, tidied his clothing, and with steely dignity strode out the door a second time.

Leonards stood surrounded by a smiling knot of men, enlisted men and officers alike. The boy was grinning wearily.

"Attention!" Devall barked, and immediately the area fell silent. He stepped forward.

Leonards raised one arm in an exhausted salute. There were some ugly bruises on him, Devall noticed.

"I'm back, Colonel."

"I'm aware of that. You understand that I'll have to return you to the Marks for trial anyway, despite your no doubt daring escape?"

The boy smiled and shook his head. "No, sir. You don't follow, sir. The trial's over. I've been tried and acquitted."

"What's that?"

"It was trial by ordeal, Colonel. They prayed for half an hour or so, and then they dumped me in the lake down the road. The dead man's two brothers came after me and tried to drown me, but I outswam them and came up safely on the other side."

He shook his hair like a drenched cat, scattering a spray of water several feet in the air. "They nearly had me, once. But as soon as I got across the lake alive and undrowned, it proved to them I couldn't have meant any harm. So they declared me innocent, apologized, and turned me loose. They were still praying when I left them."

There seemed to be no bitterness in Leonards' attitude; apparently, Devall thought, he had understood the reason for the decision to hand him over and would not hold it against him now. That was gratifying.

"You'd better get to your quarters and dry off, Lieutenant. And then come to my office. I'd like to talk to you there."

"Yes, sir."

Devall spun sharply and headed back across the clearing to his office. He slammed the door behind him and switched on the autotype. The report to Earth would have to be amended now.

A moment or two after he had finished, the intercom glowed. He turned it on and heard Steber's voice saying, "Sir, the old priest is here. He wants to apologize to you for everything. He's wearing clothing of celebration, and he brought a peace-offering for us."

"Tell him I'll be right out," Devall said. "And call all the

men together. Including Dudley. *Especially* Dudley. I want him to see this."

He slipped off his sweat-stained jacket and took a new one out. Surveying himself in the mirror, he nodded approvingly.

Well, well, he thought. So the boy came through it safely. That's good.

But he knew that the fate of Paul Leonards had been irrelevant all along, except on the sheerly personal level. It was the larger issue that counted.

For the first time, Earth had made a concrete demonstration of the equality-of-intelligent-life doctrine it had been preaching so long. He had shown that he respected the Markin laws in terms of what they were *to the Marks*, and he had won the affection of a race as a result. Having the boy return unharmed was in the nature of an unbegged bonus.

But the precedent had been set. And the next time, perhaps, on some other world, the outcome might not be so pleasant. Some cultures had pretty nasty ways of putting criminals to death.

He realized that the burden the Earth exploration teams carried now had become many times heavier—that now, Earthmen would be subject to the laws of the planets who hosted them, and no more unwitting botanical excursions into sacred gardens could be tolerated. But it was for the ultimate good, he thought. We've shown them that we're not overlords, and that most of us don't want to be overlords. And now the thumb comes down on *us*.

He opened the door and stepped out. The men had gathered, and the old priest knelt abjectly at the foot of the steps, bearing some sort of enameled box as his offering. Devall smiled and returned the bow, and lifted the old alien gently to his feet.

We'll have to be on our best behaviour from now on, he thought. We'll really have to watch our steps. But it'll be worth it.

OZYMANDIAS

And some of the worlds of the galaxy will not be inhabited by living creatures at all. When the men of Earth reach them, they will find only the signs of dead civilizations—the Pompeiis and Chichén Itzá of other planets. Such worlds will be the concern not of zoologists nor of diplomats nor of military men, but of archaeologists. And in their probing, the archaeologists may uncover something of grave and shattering consequence for the worlds of living beings.

The planet had been dead about a million years. That was our first impression, as our ship orbited down to its sere brown surface, and as it happened our first impression turned out to be right. There had been a civilization here *once*—but Earth had swung around Sol ten-to-the-sixth times since the last living being of this world had drawn breath.

“A dead planet.” Colonel Mattern exclaimed bitterly. “Nothing here that’s of any use. We might as well pack up and move on.”

It was hardly surprising that Mattern would feel that way. In urging a quick departure and an immediate removal to some world of greater utilitarian value, Mattern was, after all, only serving the best interests of his employers. His employers were the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the United States of America. They expected Mattern and his half of the crew to produce results, and by way of results they meant new weapons and military alliances. They hadn’t tossed in 70 per cent of the budget for this trip just to sponsor a lot of archaeological putterings.

But luckily for *our* half of the outfit—the archaeological putterers’ half—Mattern did not have an absolute voice in the affairs of the outfit. Perhaps the General Staff had kicked in for 70 per cent of our budget, but the cautious men of the military’s Public Liaison branch had seen to it that we had at least some rights.

Dr. Leopold, head of the non-military segment of the expedi-

tion, said brusquely, "Sorry, Mattern, but I'll have to apply the limiting clause here."

Mattern started to sputter. "But—"

"But nothing, Mattern. We're here. We've spent a good chunk of American cash in getting here. I insist that we spend the minimum time allotted for scientific research, as long as we *are* here."

Mattern scowled, looking down at the table, supporting his chin on his thumbs and digging the rest of his fingers in hard back of his jawbone. He was annoyed, but he was smart enough to know he didn't have much of a case to make against Leopold.

The rest of us—four archaeologists and seven military men; they outnumbered us a trifle—watched eagerly as our superiors battled. My eyes strayed through the porthole and I looked at the dry windblown plain, marked here and there with the stumps of what might have been massive monuments millennia ago.

Mattern said bleakly, "The world is of utterly no strategic consequence. Why, it's so old that even the vestiges of civilization have turned to dust!"

"Nevertheless, I reserve the right granted to me to explore any world we land on, for a period of at least one hundred sixty-eight hours," Leopold returned implacably.

Exasperated, Mattern burst out, "Dammit, *why?* Just to spite me? Just to prove the innate intellectual superiority of the scientist to the man of war?"

"Mattern, I'm not injecting personalities into this."

"I'd like to know what you *are* doing, then? Here we are on a world that's obviously useless to me and probably just as useless to you. Yet you stick me on a technicality and force me to waste a week here. Why, if not out of spite?"

"We've made only the most superficial reconnaissance so far," Leopold said. "For all we know this place may be the answer to many questions of galactic history. It may even be a treasure-trove of superbombs, for all—"

"Pretty damned likely!" Mattern exploded. He glared around the conference room, fixing each of the scientific members of the committee with a baleful stare. He was making it quite clear that he was trapped into a wasteful expense of time by our foggy-eyed desire for Knowledge.

Useless knowledge. Not good hard practical knowledge of the kind *he* valued.

"All right," he said finally. "I've protested and I've lost, Leopold. You're within your rights in insisting on remaining here one week. But you'd damned well better be ready to blast off when your time's up!"

It had been foregone all along, of course. The charter of our expedition was explicit on the matter. We had been sent out to comb a stretch of worlds near the Galactic Rim that had already been brushed over hastily by a survey mission.

The surveyors had been looking simply for signs of life, and, finding none, they had moved on. We were entrusted with the task of investigating in detail. Some of the planets in the group had been inhabited once, the surveyors had reported. None bore present life.

Our job was to comb through the assigned worlds with diligence. Leopold, leading our group, had the task of doing pure archaeological research on the dead civilizations; Mattern and his men had the more immediately practical job of looking for fissionable material, leftover alien weapons, possible sources of lithium or tritium for fusion, and other militarily useful things. You could argue that in a strictly pragmatic sense our segment of the group was just dead weight, carted along for the ride at great expense, and you would be right.

But the public temper over the last few hundred years in America has frowned on purely military expeditions. And so, as a sop to the nation's conscience, five archaeologists, of little empirical consequence so far as national security mattered, were tacked onto the expedition.

Us.

Mattern made it quite clear at the outset that *his* boys were the Really Important members of the expedition, and that we were simply ballast. In a way, we had to agree. Tension was mounting once again on our sadly disunited planet; there was no telling when the Other Hemisphere would rouse from its quiescence of a hundred years and decide to plunge once more into space. If anything of military value lay out here, we knew we had to find it before They did.

The good old armaments race. Hi-ho! The old space stories used to talk about expeditions from Earth. Well, we *were* from Earth, abstractly speaking—but in actuality we were from

America, period. Global unity was as much of a pipedream as it had been three hundred years earlier, in the remote and primitive chemical-rocket era of space travel. Amen. End of sermon. We got to work.

The planet had no name, and we didn't give it one; a special commission of what was laughably termed the United Nations Organization was working on the problem of assigning names to the hundreds of worlds of the galaxy, using the old idea of borrowing from ancient Terran mythologies in analogy to the Mercury-Venus-Mars nomenclature of our own system.

Probably they would end up saddling this world with something like Thoth or Bel-Marduk or perhaps Avalokites vara. We knew it simply as Planet Four of the system belonging to a yellow-white F5 IV Procyonoid sun, Revised HD Catalog 170861.

It was roughly Earthtype, with a diameter of 6100 miles, a gravity index of .93, a mean temperature of 45 degrees F. with a daily fluctuation range of about ten degrees, and a thin, nasty atmosphere composed mostly of carbon dioxide with wisps of helium and hydrogen and the barest smidgeon of oxygen. Quite possibly the air had been breathable by humanoid life millions of years ago—but that was—millions of years ago. We took good care to practise our breathing-mask drills before we ventured out of the ship.

The sun, as noted, was an F5 IV and fairly hot, but Planet Four was a hundred eighty-five million miles away from it at perihelion, and a good deal further when it was at the other swing of its rather eccentric orbit; the good old Keplerian ellipse took quite a bit of punishment in this system. Planet Four reminded me in many ways of Mars—except that Mars, of course, had never known intelligent life of any kind, at least none that had troubled to leave a hint of its existence, while this planet had obviously had a flourishing civilization at a time when Pithecanthropus was Earth's noblest being.

In any event, once we had thrashed out the matter of whether or not we were going to stay here or pull up and head for the next planet on our schedule, the five of us set to work. We knew we had only a week—Mattern would never grant us an extension unless we came up with something good enough to change his mind, which was improbable—and we wanted to get as much done in that week as possible. With the sky as full of

worlds as it is, this planet might never be visited by Earth scientists again.

Mattern and his men served notice right away that they were going to help us, but reluctantly and minimally. We unlimbered the three small halftracks carried aboard ship and got them into functioning order. We stowed our gear—cameras, picks and shovels, camel's-hair brushes—and donned our breathing-masks, and Mattern's men helped us get the halftracks out of the ship and pointed in the right direction.

Then they stood back and waited for us to shove off.

"Don't any of you plan to accompany us?" Leopold asked. The halftracks each held up to four men.

Mattern shook his head. "You fellows go out by yourselves today and let us know what you find. We can make better use of the time filing and catching up on back log entries."

I saw Leopold start to scowl. Mattern was being openly contemptuous; the least he could do was have his men make a token search for fissionable or fusionable matter! But Leopold swallowed down his anger.

"Okay," he said. "You do that. If we come across any raw veins of plutonium I'll radio back."

"Sure," Mattern said. "Thanks for the favor. Let me know if you find a brass mine, too." He laughed harshly. "Raw plutonium! I half believe you're serious!"

We had worked out a rough sketch of the area, and we split up into three units. Leopold, alone, headed straight due west, toward the dry riverbed we had spotted from the air. He intended to check alluvial deposits, I guess.

Marshall and Webster, sharing one halftrack, struck out to the hilly country southeast of our landing point. A substantial city appeared to be buried under the sand there. Gerhardt and I, in the other vehicle, made off to the north, where we hoped to find remnants of yet another city. It was a bleak, windy day; the endless sand that covered this world mounted into little dunes before us, and the wind picked up handfuls and tossed it against the plastite dome that covered our truck. Underneath the steel cleats of our tractor-belt, there was a steady crunch-crunch of metal coming down on sand that hadn't been disturbed in millennia.

Neither of us spoke for a while. Then Gerhardt said, "I hope the ship's still there when we get back to the base."

Frowning, I turned to look at him as I drove. Gerhardt had always been an enigma: a small scrunchy guy with untidy brown hair flapping in his eyes, eyes that were set a little too close together. He had a degree from the University of Kansas and had put in some time on their field staff with distinction, or so his references said.

I said, "What the hell do you mean?"

"I don't trust Mattern. He hates us."

"He doesn't. Mattern's no villain—just a fellow who wants to do his job and go home. But what do you mean, the ship not being there?"

"He'll blast off without us. You see the way he sent us all out into the desert and kept his own men back. I tell you, he'll strand us here!"

I snorted. "Don't be a paranoid. Mattern won't do anything of the sort."

"He thinks we're dead weight on the expedition," Gerhardt insisted. "What better way to get rid of us?"

The halftrack breasted a hump in the desert. I kept wishing a vulture would squeal somewhere, but there was not even that. Life had left this world ages ago. I said, "Mattern doesn't have much use for *us*, sure. But would he blast off and leave three perfectly good halftracks behind? Would he?"

It was a good point. Gerhardt grunted agreement after a while. Mattern would *never* toss equipment away, though he might not have such scruples about five surplus archaeologists.

We rode along silently for a while longer. By now we had covered twenty miles through this utterly barren land. As far as I could see, we might just as well have stayed at the ship. At least there we had a surface lie of building foundations.

But another ten miles and we came across our city. It seemed to be of linear form, no more than half a mile wide and stretching out as far as we could see—maybe six or seven hundred miles; if we had time, we would check the dimensions from the air.

Of course it wasn't much of a city. The sand had pretty well covered everything, but we could see foundations jutting up here and there, weathered lumps of structural concrete and reinforced metal. We got out and unpacked the power-shovel.

An hour later, we were sticky with sweat under our thin spacesuits and we had succeeded in transferring a few thousand

cubic yards of soil from the ground to an area a dozen yards away. We had dug one devil of a big hole in the ground.

And we had nothing.

Nothing. Not an artifact, not a skull, not a yellowed tooth. No spoons, no knives, no baby-rattles.

Nothing.

The foundations of some of the buildings had endured, though whittled down to stumps by a million years of sand and wind and rain. But nothing else of this civilization had survived. Mattern, in his scorn, had been right, I admitted ruefully: this planet was as useless to us as it was to them. Weathered foundations could tell us little except that there had once been a civilization here. An imaginative paleontologist can reconstruct a dinosaur from a fragment of a thighbone, can sketch out a presentable saurian with only a fossilized ischium to guide him. But could we extrapolate a culture, a code of laws, a technology, a philosophy, from bare weathered building foundations?

Not very likely.

We moved on and dug somewhere else half a mile away, hoping at least to unearth one tangible remnant of the civilization that had been. But time had done its work; we were lucky to have the building foundations. All else was gone.

"Boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretch far away," I muttered.

Gerhardt looked up from his digging. "Eh? What's that?" he demanded.

"Shelley," I told him.

"Oh. Him."

He went back to digging.

Late in the afternoon we finally decided to call it quits and head back to the base. We had been in the field for seven hours and had nothing to show for it except a few hundred feet of tridim films of building foundations.

The sun was beginning to set; Planet Four had a thirty-five hour day, and it was coming to its end. The sky, always somber, was darkening now. There was no moon. Planet Four had no satellites. It seemed a bit unfair; Three and Five of the system each had four moons, while around the massive gas giant that was Eight a cluster of thirteen moonlets whirled.

We wheeled round and headed back, taking an alternate

route three miles east of the one we had used on the way out, in case we might spot something. It was a forlorn hope, though.

Six miles along our journey, the truck radio came to life. The dry, testy voice of Dr. Leopold reached us:

"Calling Trucks Two and Three. Two and Three, do you read me? Come in, Two and Three."

Gerhardt was driving. I reached across his knee to key in the response channel and said, "Anderson and Gerhardt in Number Three, sir. We read you."

A moment later, somewhat more faintly, came the sound of Number Two keying into the three-way channel, and I heard Marshall saying, "Marshall and Webster in Two, Dr. Leopold. Is something wrong?"

"I've found something," Leopold said.

From the way Marshall exclaimed "*Really!*" I knew that Truck Number Two had had no better luck than we. I said, "That makes one of us, then."

"You've had no luck, Anderson?"

"Not a scrap. Not a potsherd."

"How about you, Marshall?"

"Check. Scattered signs of a city, but nothing of archaeological value, sir."

I heard Leopold chuckle before he said, "Well, *I've* found something. It's a little too heavy for me to manage by myself. I want both outfits to come out here and take a look at it."

"What is it, sir?" Marshall and I asked simultaneously, in just about the same words.

But Leopold was fond of playing the Man of Mystery. He said, "You'll see when you get here. Take down my coordinates and get a move on. I want to be back at the base by nightfall."

Shrugging, we changed course to head for Leopold's location. He was about seventeen miles southwest of us, it seemed. Marshall and Webster had an equally long trip to make; they were sharply southeast of Leopold's position.

The sky was fairly dark when we arrived at what Leopold had computed as his coordinates. The headlamps of the half-track lit up the desert for nearly a mile, and at first there was no sign of anyone or anything. Then I spotted Leopold's half-track parked off to the east, and from the south Gerhardt saw the lights of the third truck rolling toward us.

We reached Leopold at about the same time. He was not alone. There was an—object—with him.

"Greetings, gentlemen." He had a smug grin on his whiskery face. "I seem to have made a find."

He stepped back and, as if drawing an imaginary curtain, let us take a peek at his find. I frowned in surprise and puzzlement. Standing in the sand behind Leopold's halftrack was something that looked very much like a robot.

It was tall, seven feet or more, and vaguely humanoid; that is, it had arms extending from its shoulders, a head on those shoulders, and legs. The head was furnished with receptor plates where eyes, ears, and mouth would be on humans. There were no other openings. The robot's body was massive and squarish, with sloping shoulders, and its dark metal skin was pitted and corroded as by the workings of the elements over uncountable centuries.

It was buried up to its knees in sand. Leopold, still grinning smugly (and understandably proud of his find) said, "Say something to us, robot."

From the mouth-receptors came a clanking sound, the gnashing of—what? Gears?—and a voice came forth, oddly high-pitched but audible. The words were alien and were spoken in a slippery sing-song kind of inflection. I felt a chill go quivering down my back.

"It understands what you say?" Gerhardt questioned.

"I don't think so," Leopold said. "Not yet, anyway. But when I address it directly, it starts spouting. I think it's a kind of—well, guide to the ruins, so to speak. Built by the ancients to provide information to passersby; only it seems to have survived the ancients and their monuments as well."

I studied the thing. It *did* look incredibly old—and sturdy; it was so massively solid that it might indeed have outlasted every other vestige of civilization on this planet. It had stopped talking, now, and was simply staring ahead. Suddenly it wheeled ponderously on its base, swung an arm up to take in the landscape nearby, and started speaking again.

I could almost put the words in its mouth: "*—and over here we have the ruins of the Parthenon, chief temple of Athena on the Acropolis. Completed in the year 438 B.C., it was partially destroyed by an explosion in 1687 while in use as a powder magazine by the Turks—*"

"It *does* seem to be a sort of a guide," Webster remarked. "I get the definite feeling that we're being given an historical

narration now, all about the wondrous monuments that must have been on this site once."

"If only we could understand what it's saying!" Marshall exclaimed.

"We can try to decipher the language somehow," Leopold said. "Anyway, it's a magnificent find, isn't it? And—"

I began to laugh suddenly. Leopold, offended, glared at me and said, "May I ask what's so funny, Dr. Anderson?"

"Ozymandias!" I said, when I had subsided a bit. "It's a natural! Ozymandias!"

"I'm afraid I don't—"

"Listen to him," I said. "It's as if he was built and put here for those who follow after, to explain to us the glories of the race that built the cities. Only the cities are gone, and the robot is still here! Doesn't he seem to be saying, '*Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair*'?"

"'*Nothing beside remains.*'" Webster quoted. "It's apt. Builders and cities all gone, but the poor robot doesn't know it, and delivers his spiel nonetheless. Yes. We ought to call him Ozymandias!"

Gerhardt said, "What shall we do with it?"

"You say you couldn't budge it?" Webster asked Leopold.

"It weighs five or six hundred pounds. It can move of its own volition, but I couldn't move it myself."

"Maybe the five of us—" Webster suggested.

"No," Leopold said. An odd smile crossed his face. "We will leave it here."

"What?"

"Only temporarily," he added. "We'll save it—as a sort of surprise for Mattern. We'll spring it on him the final day, letting him think all along that this planet was worthless. He can rib us all he wants—but when it's time to go, we'll produce our prize!"

"You think it's safe to leave it out here?" Gerhardt asked.

"Nobody's going to steal it," Marshall said.

"And it won't melt in the rain," Webster added.

"But—suppose it walks away?" Gerhardt demanded. "It can do that, can't it?"

Leopold said, "Of course. But where would it go? It will remain where it is, I think. If it moves, we can always trace it with the radar. Back to the base, now; it grows late."

We climbed back into our halftracks. The robot, silent once

again, planted knee-deep in the sand, outlined against the darkening sky, swiveled to face us and lifted one thick arm in a kind of salute.

"Remember," Leopold warned us as we left. "Not one word about this to Mattern!"

At the base that night, Colonel Mattern and his seven aides were remarkably curious about our day's activities. They tried to make it seem as if they were taking a sincere interest in our work, but it was perfectly obvious to us that they were simply goading us into telling them what they had anticipated—that we had found absolutely nothing. This was the response they got, since Leopold forbade mentioning Ozymandias. Aside from the robot, the truth was that we *had* found nothing, and when they learned of this they smiled knowingly, as if saying that had we listened to them in the first place we would all be back on Earth seven days earlier, with no loss.

The following morning after breakfast Mattern announced that he was sending out a squad to look for fissionable materials, unless we objected.

"We'll only need one of the halftracks," he said. "That leaves two for you. You don't mind, do you?"

"We can get along with two," Leopold replied a little sourly. "Just so you keep out of our territory."

"Which is?"

Instead of telling him, Leopold merely said, "We've adequately examined the area to the southeast of here, and found nothing of note. It won't matter to us if your geological equipment chews the place up."

Mattern nodded, eyeing Leopold curiously as if the obvious concealment of our place of operations had aroused suspicions. I wondered whether it was wise to conceal information from Mattern. Well, Leopold wanted to play his little game, I thought; and one way to keep Mattern from seeing Ozymandias was not to tell him where we would be working.

"I thought you said this planet was useless from your viewpoint, Colonel," I remarked.

Mattern stared at me. "I'm sure of it. But it would be idiotic of me not to have a look, wouldn't it—as long as we're spending the time here anyway?"

I had to admit that he was right. "Do you expect to find anything, though?"

He shrugged. "No fissionables, certainly. It's a safe bet that everything radioactive on *this* planet has long since decomposed. But there's always the possibility of lithium, you know."

"Or pure tritium," Leopold said acidly. Mattern merely laughed, and made no reply.

Half an hour later we were bound westward again to the point where we had left Ozymandias. Gerhardt, Webster, and I rode together in one halftrack, and Leopold and Marshall occupied the other. The third, with two of Mattern's men and the prospecting equipment, ventured off to the southeast toward the area Marshall and Webster had fruitlessly combed the day before.

Ozymandias was where we had left him, with the sun coming up behind him and glowing round his sides. I wondered how many sunrises he had seen. Billions, perhaps.

We parked the halftracks not far from the robot and approached, Webster filming him in the bright light of morning. A wind was whistling down from the north, kicking up eddies in the sand.

"Ozymandias have remain here," the robot said as we drew near.

In English.

For a moment we didn't realize what had happened, but what followed afterward was a five-man quadruple take. While we gabbled in confusion the robot said, "Ozymandias decipher the language somehow. Seem to be a sort of guide."

"Why—he's parroting fragments from our conversation yesterday," Marshall said.

"I don't think he's parroting," I said. "The words form coherent concepts. He's *talking* to us!"

"Built by the ancients to provide information to passersby," Ozymandias said.

"Ozymandias!" Leopold said. "Do you speak English?"

The response was a clicking noise, followed moments later by, "Ozymandias understand. Not have words enough. Talk more."

The five of us trembled with common excitement. It was apparent now what had happened, and the happening was nothing short of incredible. Ozymandias had listened patiently to everything we had said the night before; then, after we had gone, he had applied his million-year-old mind to the problem of organizing our sounds into sense, and somehow had suc-

ceeded. Now it was merely a matter of feeding vocabulary to the creature and letting him assimilate the new words. We had a walking and talking Rosetta Stone!

Two hours flew by so rapidly we hardly noticed their passing. We tossed words at Ozymandias as fast as we could, defining them when possible to aid him in relating them to the others already engraved on his mind.

By the end of that time he could hold a passable conversation with us. He ripped his legs free of the sand that had bound them for centuries—and, serving the function for which he had been built millennia ago, he took us on a guided tour of the civilization that had been and had built him.

Ozymandias was a fabulous storehouse of archaeological data. We could mine him for years.

His people, he told us, had called themselves the Thaiquens (or so it sounded)—had lived and thrived for three hundred thousand local years, and in the declining days of their history had built him, as indestructible guide to their indestructible cities. But the cities had crumbled, and Ozymandias alone remained—bearing with him memories of what had been.

“This was the city of Durab. In its day it held eight million people. Where I stand now was the Temple of Decamon, sixteen hundred feet of your measurement high. It faced the Street of the Winds—”

“The Eleventh Dynasty was begun by the accession to the Presidium of Chonnigar IV, in the eighteen thousandth year of the city. It was in the reign of this dynasty that the neighboring planets first were reached—”

“The Library of Durab was on this spot. It boasted fourteen million volumes. None exist today. Long after the builders had gone, I spent time reading the books of the Library and they are memorized within me—”

“The Plague struck down nine thousand a day for more than a year, in that time—”

It went on and on, a cyclopean newsreel, growing in detail as Ozymandias absorbed our comments and added new words to his vocabulary. We followed the robot as he wheeled his way through the desert, our recorders gobbling in each word, our minds numbed and dazed by the magnitude of our find. In this single robot lay waiting to be tapped the totality of a culture that had lasted three hundred thousand years! We could

mine Ozymandias the rest of our lives, and still not exhaust the fund of data implanted in his all-encompassing mind.

When, finally, we ripped ourselves away and, leaving Ozymandias in the desert, returned to the base, we were full to bursting. Never in the history of our science had such a find been vouchsafed: a complete record, accessible and translated for us.

We agreed to conceal our find from Mattern once again. But, like small boys newly given a toy of great value, we found it hard to hide our feelings. Although we said nothing explicit, our overexcited manner certainly must have hinted to Mattern that we had not had as fruitless a day as we had claimed.

That, and Leopold's refusal to tell him exactly where we had been working during the day, must have aroused Mattern's suspicion's. In any event, during the night as we lay in bed I heard the sound of halftracks rumbling off into the desert; and the following morning, when we entered the messhall for breakfast, Mattern and his men, unshaven and untidy, turned to look at us with peculiar vindictive gleams in their eyes.

Matterns said, "Good morning, gentlemen. We've been waiting for some time for you to arise."

"It's no later than usual, is it?" Leopold asked.

"Not at all. But my men and I have been up all night. We—ah—did a bit of archaeological prospecting while you slept." The Colonel leaned forward, fingering his rumpled lapels, and said, "Dr. Leopold, for what reason did you choose to conceal from me the fact that you had discovered an object of extreme strategic importance?"

"What do you mean?" Leopold demanded—with a quiver taking the authority out of his voice.

"I mean," said Mattern quietly, "the robot you named Ozymandias. Just why did you decide not to tell me about it?"

"I had every intention of doing so before our departure," Leopold said.

Mattern shrugged. "Be that as it may. You concealed the existence of your find. But your manner last night led us to investigate the area—and since the detectors showed a metal object some twenty miles to the west, we headed that way. Ozymandias was quite surprised to learn that there were other Earthmen here."

There was a moment of crackling silence. Then Leopold said, "I'll have to ask you not to meddle with that robot,

Colonel Mattern. I apologize for having neglected to tell you of it—I didn't think you were quite so interested in our work—but now I must insist you and your men keep away from it."

"Oh?" Mattern said crisply. "Why?"

"Because it's an archaeological treasure-trove, Colonel. I can't begin to stress its value to us. Your men might perform some casual experiment with it and shortcircuit its memory channels, or something like that. And so I'll have to assert the rights of the archaeological group of this expedition. I'll have to declare Ozymandias part of our preserve, and off bounds for you."

Mattern's voice suddenly hardened. "Sorry, Dr. Leopold. You can't invoke that now."

"Why not?"

"Because Ozymandias is part of *our* preserve. And off bounds for you, Doctor."

I thought Leopold would have an apoplectic fit right there in the messhall. He stiffened and went white and strode awkwardly across the room toward Mattern. He choked out a question, inaudible to me.

Mattern replied, "Security, Doctor. Ozymandias is of military use. Accordingly we've brought him to the ship and placed him in sealed quarters, under top-level wraps. With the power entrusted to me for such emergencies, I'm declaring this expedition ended. We return to Earth at once with Ozymandias."

Leopold's eyes bugged. He looked at us for support, but we said nothing. Finally, incredulously, he said, "He's—of military use?"

"Of course. He's a storehouse of data on the ancient Thaiquen weapons. We've already learned things from him that are unbelievable in their scope. Why do you think this planet is bare of life, Dr. Leopold? Not even a blade of grass? A million years won't do that. But a superweapon *will*. The Thaiquens developed that weapon. And others, too. Weapons that can make your hair curl. And Ozymandias knows every detail of them. Do you think we can waste time letting you people fool with that robot, when he's loaded with military information that can make America totally impregnable? Sorry, Doctor. Ozymandias is your find, but he belongs to us. And we're taking him back to Earth.

Again the room was silent. Leopold looked at me, at Web-

ster. at Marshall, at Gerhardt. There was nothing that could be said.

This was basically a militaristic mission. Sure, a few archaeologists had been tacked onto the crew, but fundamentally it was Mattern's men and not Leopold's who were important. We weren't out here so much to increase the fund of general knowledge as to find new weapons and new sources of strategic materials for possible use against the Other Hemisphere.

And new weapons had been found. New, undreamed-of weapons, product of a science that had endured for three hundred thousand years. All locked up in Ozymandias' imperishable skull.

In a harsh voice Leopold said, "Very well, Colonel. I can't stop you, I suppose."

He turned and shuffled out without touching his food, a broken, beaten, suddenly very old man.

I felt sick.

Mattern had insisted the planet was useless and that stopping here was a waste of time; Leopold had disagreed, and Leopold had turned out to be right. We had found something of great value.

We had found a machine that could spew forth new and awesome recipes for death. We held in our hands the sum and essence of the Thaiquen science—the science that had culminated in magnificent weapons, weapons so superb they had succeeded in destroying all life on this world. And now we had access to those weapons. Dead by their own hand, the Thaiquens had thoughtfully left us a heritage of death.

Gray-faced, I rose from the table and went to my cabin. I wasn't hungry now.

"We'll be blasting off in an hour," Mattern said behind me as I left. "Get your things in order."

I hardly heard him. I was thinking of the deadly cargo we carried, the robot so eager to disgorge its fund of data. I was thinking what would happen when our scientists back on Earth began learning from Ozymandias.

The works of the Thaiquens now were ours. I thought of the poet's lines: "*Look on my works, ye Mighty—and despair.*"

CERTAINTY

The alien beings Colonel Devall had to deal with in "The Overlord's Thumb" were relatively primitive folk, still living in a ritual-and-taboo kind of culture, much like many that still exist on Earth. But another possibility worth exploring is that our men in the stars may encounter strangers of greater complexity, strangers with quite unearthly powers of persuasion—

Colonel Dean Wharton gripped the solido firmly between finger and thumb and stared into its glossy depths. Color began to rise slowly in his face. The solido showed a spaceship of unmistakably alien design descending, in a landing orbit, toward the surface of the uninhabited planet known in Terran charts as Bartlett V. Bartlett V was a Terran observation outpost. An alien landing on it was an infringement of Terran sovereignty. Colonel Wharton scowled.

Glaring straight into the pale, uneasy face of Lieutenant Crosley, Wharton said, "How long ago was this picture taken?"

"About an hour, sir. But you were in Deepsleep, and we didn't think—"

"No, you didn't think," Wharton said acidly. "Okay, let's have the rest of the story. You sent warnings to the ship, I hope."

Crosley nodded. "We beamed them wide-channel in Terran, General Galactic, Dormirani, Leesor, and Fawd. We sent the same message in each language: telling them that this is a Terran observation outpost, that they can't land here without prior permission, that they would have to depart at once. By this time they had completed their landing. We estimate their position at about 120 miles northeast of here, on the Creston Plateau."

"And did you get an answer?"

"A few minutes ago. It was in what Breckenridge says is a Fawdese dialect. They said, in effect, that they didn't recognize Terran sovereignty over this planet, for one thing, and for another they had come here to make certain scientific observa-

tions. They said they'd leave here in a week or two, after they've completed their observations."

"To which you made what reply?" Wharton said.

Crosley shook his head. "None, sir. I got word that you were coming out of Deepsleep, and so—"

"—and so you passed the buck to me. All right, Lieutenant. In your position I'd have done the same thing. Get me Breckenridge."

"Yes, sir."

Lieutenant Crosley performed a smart little salute and about-faced. Alone, Wharton shook his big, shaggy head sadly. This was what came of a century of unbroken Galactic peace. Youngsters like Crosley didn't even know what war meant. And a bunch of aliens thought it could put down on a Terran outpost planet without as much as a by-your-leave. Wharton sighed, feeling his age, admitting to himself that he had hoped to serve out his last few years without incident. He was getting close to the hundred-twenty-five-year mark; mandatory retirement came at age 130. And only an hour and a half of Deepsleep every day kept him going now. Well, there was going to be an incident, now, whether he liked it or not. Colonel Wharton straightened his shoulders.

Captain Breckenridge entered the room. The linguistics man was short and stocky, with choppy, irregular features and stubby red hair. "Sir?"

"Breckenridge, you say this alien ship spoke to you in Fawdese?"

"A Fawdese dialect, sir."

"That's what I'm getting after. Where is that ship from? The Fawd Confederacy knows better than to plonk a ship down on Terran property. Unless the Fawds are looking to provoke a war, that is."

Breckenridge said, "Oh, these aren't Fawds, sir. They simply speak a Fawdese dialect. Plenty of peoples in the Fawdese sector speak Fawdese without belonging to the Confederacy."

"You're stating the obvious," Wharton said irritably. "I want to know where these people are from."

"The best I can give is an educated guess."

"Well?"

"They come from the western tip of the Fawdese lingual sector. That's plain from their shifted vowels. There are three Fawdese-speaking races out that way: the Cyross, the Hali-

vanu, and the Dortmuni." Breckenridge ticked them off on his fingers. "The Cyross aren't a technological people. They wouldn't be sending ships this far for centuries. The Dortmuni are passive-resistance non-belligerents. *They* wouldn't be looking for trouble either. That leaves the Halivanu as the likely senders of that ship up on the plateau. You know, of course, the legends about the Halivanu—"

"Just legends. That's all they are."

"They've been documented pretty well. It's been proven that—"

"*Nothing's* been proven, Breckenridge! Hear me? Nothing has been proven about the Halivanu." Wharton rose, gripping the edges of his desk. He realized that his legs were quivering. Just to hammer the point across, he said, "I'm not interested in hearing about any strange powers the Halivanu may be thought to have. I'm interested only in getting them off this planet, and getting them off fast. Come on across to the signal room with me. I'll send these Halivanu packing right now."

There *were* all sorts of legends about the Halivanu, Wharton admitted dourly to himself as he and Breckenridge crossed the clearing and entered the outpost's communications room. Spacemen venturing into the Fawdese sector had brought back stories about mental vampires that could suck a man's mind dry, and similar gory tales. But nothing had ever been proven. The Halivanu were introverted humanoids who had little to do with the rest of the universe, keeping to themselves and seeking no outside contacts. Eerie legends always sprang up about recluses, Wharton thought. He shrugged away his uneasiness. His job was to protect the integrity of the boundaries of the Terran sphere, boundaries which these Halivanu—if they *were* Halivanu—were clearly transgressing.

"Set up contact with that ship," Wharton ordered.

Signalman Marshall acknowledged and began turning dials. After a few moments he looked up and said, "I can't get them to recognize me, sir."

"That's all right. They'll be listening, never worry. Breckenridge, you're better at this dialect business than I'd be. Pick up the mike and tell them that they're trespassing on Terran ground, and that they have exactly—ah, make it three hours—three hours to blast off. Otherwise we'll be compelled to treat their landing as an act of war."

Nodding, Breckenridge began to speak. Wharton found that

he could understand most of what was being said; he knew the basic Fawd tongue, of course, since it was one of the five great root-languages of the galaxy, and the Halivanu language differed from Fawd only in a broadening of the vowels, minor grammatical simplifications, and inevitable vocabulary shifts.

There was silence for a full minute after Breckenridge had finished.

"Repeat it," Wharton said.

Breckenridge recited the ultimatum a second time. Again, the only response was silence. Nearly two minutes ticked by; fidgeting, Wharton was on the verge of ordering yet another repeat when the speaker sputtered and emitted, in a dry, rasping tone, the word, "Eritomor—"

It was the Fawdese for "*Earthmen*." A moment later came more Fawdese words, spoken slowly and carefully. Wharton's face went steely as he listened. The Halivanu spokesman was explaining politely that since the Free World of Halivanth did not recognize the Terran claim to this uninhabited world, there was no reason why the Halivanu ship should leave. However, the Halivanu had no desire to claim the planet for themselves, but they simply wished to carry out certain solar observations over a period of some nine or ten Galactic Standard days, after which time they would be glad to depart.

At the conclusion of the statement, Breckenridge said, "They declare that they don't recognize our claim and—"

Wharton shut him up with an impatient gesture. "I understood the message, Lieutenant." He picked up the microphone himself and said, in halting Fawdese, "This is Colonel Dean Wharton speaking. If you want to make solar observations here, you'll have to clear it through regular diplomatic channels. I'm not authorized to grant any landings. And so I have to request that you—"

He was interrupted by a voice from the speaker. "*Eritomor—vor held d'chayku kon derinilak—*"

It was the same speech the Halivanu spokesman had delivered before, repeated in the same slow, flat tone, as though spoken to a wayward child. Annoyed, Wharton waited till the Halivanu was finished, and tried to speak again. But he got no more than a few words out before the Halivanu reply started for the third time.

"It's a tape," Marshall murmured. "They've got the ends looped together and it's going to keep repeating indefinitely."

"Let's monitor it for a while," Wharton said.

They monitored it. After the tenth successive repetition he ordered the signalman to shut down. Nothing was going to be gained through radio ultimatums, obviously. The Halivanu simply would not listen. The only thing to do, clearly, was to send an emissary over to the alien ship to explain things in person. And if that didn't work—

Other steps would be necessary. "Sound a Red Alert," Wharton said. "We'd better start getting this place tightened up for battle. Just in case," he added. "Just in case."

The thirty-seven men of the Bartlett V outpost occupied their battle stations with obvious relish. To most of them, an alien invasion—even an invasion by only one ship—was a pleasant diversion indeed, for men serving a three-year hitch on an empty planet a thousand light-years from home. The break from the usual routine of observation and report-filing was more than welcome.

Colonel Wharton shared none of their delight, though. He was old enough to remember what war was like—as a raw recruit in 2716 he had taken part in the mop-up activities of the Terra-Dormiran conflict, just over a hundred years before. There hadn't been war in the galaxy since. And, inasmuch as there wasn't a man in his outfit older than ninety, none of his men had any real idea of what a galactic war was like. Ships splitting open in midspace like gaffed fish, whole continents leveled in scorched-earth campaigns, an entire generation of young men practically wiped out—no, there was nothing nice about war, from any angle. But maybe a century of peace had caused galactic complacency. Certainly no alien ship would have dared make a landing like this in the last century, Wharton thought. And who could have imagined such a reply to an ultimatum from a Terran commanding officer.

The worst part of the situation was that the responsibility was all his. The quickest subradio message to Earth would take a month to arrive; a month more would be needed for a reply. If he waited, Terra's territorial integrity could have been violated a dozen times over. So the buck ended with Colonel Wharton. If the Halivanu insisted on remaining, he could choose between blasting them off the planet and probably starting a war, or letting them stay and thereby issuing an open invitation to the entire universe to come trespass on Terran

worlds. It wasn't a pretty choice. But there was no one he could go to for advice except men of his own rank on other outpost worlds, and it was senseless to do that. He would have to make his own decisions.

Breckenridge came up to him as he stood observing the conversion of the outpost to a fort. The post was amply armed, and Wharton held regular artillery drills. But he had never dreamed he would actually be ordering a Red Alert out here on this relatively nonstrategic world.

"Sir?"

"What is it, Breckenridge?"

"I'd like to volunteer for the job of going to see the Halivanu, sir. I think I'm the best fitted man for talking to them."

Wharton nodded. Breckenridge had been his choice; but the man had made matters simpler by volunteering. "Accepted, Captain. Order Smithson to break out a jetsled for you. You'll leave at once."

"Any special instructions?"

"Repeat that ultimatum to them, as a starter. Make it clear that we're automatically bound to blast them down if they don't get off here in a couple of hours. Get the point across that we can't help ourselves, that it's our job to destroy any alien ships that make unauthorized landings, and that therefore the responsibility for starting a possible war is all theirs."

"I've got it, sir."

"Good. Don't bluster, don't threaten—just convince them that our hands are tied. Make them see the pickle we're in. Dammit, I don't *want* to shoot at them, but I will if I have to—and I'll have to if they stay here. Tell them they can make all the solar observations they want if they'll only go through the proper channels."

Breckenridge nodded. There were beads of sweat on his face. He looked troubled.

Wharton said, "You don't *have* to volunteer for this, Captain. There are other men I could send if—"

"It's my job. I'm not withdrawing."

"You're worried about those crazy stories you've heard, Breckenridge. I can almost read your mind."

"The stories are—nothing but stories, sir," Breckenridge said stolidly. "Just so much jetwash. May I leave now, sir."

Wharton smiled. "You're a good man, Breckenridge. Dismissed."

By jetsled it would take more than an hour for Breckenridge to reach the alien spaceship; allow him half an hour for parleying. Wharton thought, and an hour or so to return. Make it three hours round trip. So if Breckenridge were successful, the Halivanu ship would be blasting off about the same time that Breckenridge returned to base. *If*, Wharton thought. He stood for nearly half an hour in front of the radar screen, staring at the white blip that represented the Halivanu ship a hundred twenty miles away, and at the tiny white bug racing northeast across the screen that was the reflected image of Breckenridge's sled.

Then he walked away and tried to busy himself in routine activities. But his mind kept going back to the Halivanu incident. He felt very tired. There was nothing he wanted to do more than crawl into the Deepsleep tank and let the cool therapeutic fluids wash over him.

Wharton reminded himself forcibly that he had already taken his Deepsleep time for the day. He rationed it strictly, one session and no more per diem. Which meant he'd have to stay on his pins unaided.

The afternoon shadows lengthened. Bartlett V was a moonless world, and night fell fast. The little sun was dipping rapidly toward the horizon, casting an orange light over the empty, barren plains. The radar screen showed that Breckenridge was now on his way back.

He returned four hours after he had departed. The screen still showed the Halivanu ship on the plateau. The linguist reported immediately to Colonel Wharton.

"Well?"

Breckenridge smiled wanly. "It's all arranged, sir. They'll be leaving next week, as soon as they've completed their observations."

Wharton sat down abruptly. "What did you say?"

"I agreed to let them stay, sir."

Wharton felt as though he'd been tomahawked. In a rigidly controlled voice he said, "You agreed to let them stay, Breckenridge? How polite of you! But I thought I sent you there to deliver an ultimatum—not to make agreements."

"Of course, sir. But I discussed it with them and we agreed it would be unreasonable to drive them away before they had finished their observations. They clearly don't mean any harm. They're not even carrying armaments, sir."

"Breckenridge, are you out of your head?" Wharton asked, aghast.

"Sir?"

"How can you stand there and talk such drivel to me? Your opinion of their harmlessness is irrelevant, and you know it. You were sent bearing an ultimatum, that is all. I wanted their reply."

"But we talked it over, sir. It can't hurt us to make a little concession like this."

"Breckenridge, did those aliens drug you? You're talking like a madman. What right did you have—"

"You said yourself that you would rather give in and let them stay than start a war, sir. And since they insisted on staying, I followed your instructions and told them it would be okay, provided they left when—"

"Followed *my* instructions?" Wharton roared. His hand drummed menacingly on the desktop. "When did you ever hear me say such a thing?"

"Why, just before I left," Breckenridge said innocently.

"Now I *know* you're out of your head. I never said a word about granting concessions to them. I told you to let them know that if they weren't off this planet by my deadline I'd be compelled to destroy them. Not a syllable about concessions. And—"

"I beg to contradict you, sir, but—"

Sighing, Wharton rang for his orderly. A moment later the man stuck his head in the door. Wharton said, "Rogers, take Captain Breckenridge to the infirmary and have him detained for a psychiatric examination. And send Smithson to me."

Smithson entered a few minutes afterward. The enlisted man stood diffidently near the door.

Wharton said, "Tell me exactly what transpired between Captain Breckenridge and the aliens."

Smithson shook his head. "Sorry, but I can't, Colonel. I didn't go into the alien ship. Captain Breckenridge wanted me to wait outside in the sled."

Keeping his voice tight, Wharton said, "Oh. In that case you can't help me, Smithson. Dismissed."

"Yes, sir."

Wharton waited until the door closed and put his head in his hands. His shoulders slumped wearily.

He hadn't given Breckenridge any instructions to parley. Yet

the linguist swore up and down that he had. What would make a solid man like Breckenridge snap like that?

Wharton shook his head. They told stories about the Halivanu, vague stories of vaguer mental powers. But that stuff was —Breckenridge himself had put a name to it—jetwash. Wharton was certain of it. In his time he had seen too many legends fade like the dreams they were to be taken in by anything new. Imaginative spacemen *always* attributed mystical powers to little-known races, but such attributions had to be discounted pretty near to one hundred per cent.

Drawing in his breath sharply, Wharton jabbed down on his call-button. The orderly appeared.

"Send me Lieutenant Crosley, quick-quick."

Crosley arrived five minutes later. It was nearly night now. The Lieutenant looked even more pale, less relaxed than ever. He was a recent Academy product, not much past thirty.

Leaning forward, Wharton said, "We've got some complications, Lieutenant. Incidentally, I'm making a tape recording of this conversation."

Crosley nodded. "Complications, sir?"

"I sent Breckenridge to the aliens with an ultimatum this afternoon. I wanted him to tell them they had three hours to get off the planet, or I'd open fire. But instead he granted them permission to stay here until they finished their observations, and now he claims he said so on my authority."

"I wondered why he was taken to psych ward."

"Now you know. I don't pretend to understand why he cracked up, Crosley, but I *do* know we've got to send another man to the Halivanu right away, withdrawing Breckenridge's permission and telling them to get moving."

"Of course, sir."

"I'd like you to go, Crosley. Right now. Take one of the enlisted men with you, and make sure you both go into the Halivanu ship. Tell them that the previous messenger was unauthorized, that you're the authorized messenger, that if they don't blast off by sunrise we'll be forced to let them have it."

Crosley looked a little paler, but he remained steady. "I'll leave right away, sir."

"Before you go: repeat the message you're bearing."

Crosley repeated it.

"You won't attempt to negotiate with them, Lieutenant. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll deliver the ultimatum and leave. It isn't essential that you wait around for an answer. If they're still here by morning, we'll blast them."

"Yes, sir."

"You understand what I'm saying, now? You won't tell me later that I authorized you to negotiate?"

Crosley smiled. "Of course not, sir."

"Get going, then."

The hours passed. Taps sounded, but Wharton remained awake, pacing his office uneasily. Starlight, bright in the moonless dark, filtered through his windows. Wharton clenched his fists and stared out into the night.

He pitied Breckenridge. It was a hellish thing to lose your grip on actuality. To maintain that something is true when it's flatly false. The psych tests had shown nothing; Breckenridge firmly and positively believed that he had been instructed to parley. Schizophrenia, the psych officer said. But schizophrenia wasn't something a person got suddenly, like a twisted ankle, was it? It was a slowly building pattern of action and belief. And Breckenridge had always seemed one of the most stable men of all.

Inescapably Wharton came to the conclusion that the Halivanu had done something to him. But Breckenridge said they hadn't, and the EEG tests revealed no hint of recent drugging or hypnosis. Not that the EEG was necessarily infallible—

Wharton glowered at his faint reflection in the window. He was *certain* the Halivanu had no mysterious powers. They were just another isolationist race, bent on their own destinies and aloof from the rest of the universe. That was no reason for crediting them with magical abilities.

A light glimmered outside. Wharton heard the roar of the jetsled. Crosley was returning.

Impatiently, Wharton dashed outside. The night air was clear, cold, tangy. Crosley and his driver, an enlisted man named Rodriguez, were getting out of the sled.

They saluted when they saw him. Returning the salute with a shaky arm, Wharton said, "Did you run into any trouble?"

"No, sir. But we didn't find him, either," Crosley replied. "We searched for hours, but—"

"What in the name of the cosmos are you babbling about?"

Wharton demanded in a choked voice. "You didn't find *whom*?"

"Why, Breckenridge, of course," Crosley said. He exchanged a puzzled glance with Rodriguez. "We traveled in wide circles just as you said, until—"

Wharton felt dizzy. "What's this about looking for Breckenridge?"

"Didn't you send us out to look for him? He got lost in the plains coming back from his trip to the alien ship, and we were ordered to look for him. Sir? Sir, are you feeling all right?"

Cold fingers seemed to be encircling Wharton's heart. "Come inside with me, Lieutenant. You too, Rodriguez."

He led them into his office and played for them the tape he had made of his conversation with Crosley earlier. The two men listened in growing confusion.

When the tape had run its course, Wharton said, "Do you still maintain that I sent you out to look for Breckenridge?"

"But—yes—"

"Breckenridge is asleep in the infirmary. He was never lost. He came back hours ago. I sent you out to deliver an ultimatum. Didn't you recognize your own voice, Crosley?"

"It sounded like me, yes. But—I don't remember—that is—"

Further questioning led down the same dead end. The tape transcript only bewildered Crosley. He grew paler and paler. He was certain they had merely traveled in wide circles looking for Breckenridge, and Rodriguez backed him up on that. Even when Wharton assured him that he had watched their path on the radar, and they had gone direct to the Halivanu ship and returned straightaway, they shook their heads.

"We never went near that ship, sir. Our orders—"

"All right, Lieutenant. Go to bed. You too, Rodriguez. Maybe in the morning you'll have better memories."

Wharton could not sleep. First Breckenridge, then Crosley and Rodriguez, all of them coming back from the Halivanu ship with insane stories. The first cracks began to appear in Wharton's self-confidence. Maybe there *was* something in those spacehounds' tales of the Halivanu.

No. Beyond belief.

But how else to explain what had happened to his men? Schizophrenia wasn't contagious, was it? It was hard to swal-

low the fact that three men had gone out to the aliens and three men had returned . . . *changed*. That was the only word for it. And changed retroactively. Crosley even denied the validity of the tape he had made.

By morning, Wharton knew what his only choice was. He was no longer concerned with protecting Terra's sovereignty. That was important, but not as important as finding out just what kind of hocus-pocus the Halivanu had pulled on his men. And the only way to find out was to go to the aliens himself. He couldn't keep sending out men. Soon he would run out of officers that way.

Besides, they were only green kids at best. It took a *man*—a veteran of the Dormiran campaign—to go in there and find out the real story.

But, of course, certain necessary precautions ought to be taken—just in case.

When morning came he sent for Captain Lowell, one of the senior officers—the senior officer, with both Breckenridge and Crosley on the unreliable list. "Lowell, I'm going to make a trip to the Halivanu ship myself. You're in charge of the base till I get back. And—listen carefully—I'm going to give the Halivanu four hours to get off this planet. At the end of four hours' time I want you to blast them with the heavy-cycle guns, even if I order you not to do it. Got that? Go against my direct order, if you have to. But blast them when the time is up."

Lowell looked utterly befuddled. "Sir, I don't understand—"

"Don't try to understand. Just listen. I've made a tape of this conversation. Keep it safe and play it for me when I get back."

Leaving behind a sorely confused Lowell, Wharton made his way out to the jetsled. Smithson, who had piloted Breckenridge, was again at the controls.

They traveled in silence, the jets boosting the sled quickly and smoothly over the flat plains. The sun rose higher as they traveled. Wharton found himself yearning for the comfort of Deepsleep. But that would have to wait a few more hours, he thought. The matter would be settled, one way or another, in a few hours. If only Lowell would have the guts to disobey him, in case he came back *changed*. Wharton smiled. He was confident he'd return in full command of his senses.

It was midmorning when the sled reached the plateau where the Halivanu had established camp. Wharton saw tents surrounding the sleek alien-looking spaceship, and half a dozen

Halivanu were busily setting up instrumentation. They were tall, thin beings with coarse-grained, glossy gray-green skin. As the sled pulled up, one of them detached himself from the group and came toward Wharton.

"You Earthmen must enjoy paying us visits," the alien said in the Fawdese dialect. "By my count, you're the third."

"And the last," Wharton said. Despite himself, he felt an uneasy chill. The Halivanu had a strange, sickly-sweet odor. Wharton faced him, looking up; the creature was nearly seven feet tall.

"What is your message?" the Halivanu asked, and in the same instant Wharton felt something like a feather brushing the back of his skull.

"I—*what are you doing?*" He put his hand to the back of his head—but the feather still tickled him—

And then his panic died away.

"Well?" the alien demanded.

Wharton smiled. "I'm the Terran commander. I've come to—to tell you that it's all right—that you can stay here until you're through."

"Thank you," said the Halivanu gravely. He smiled, revealing black gums, and Wharton returned the smile. "Is that all?"

"Yes. Yes, that's all," Wharton said. He looked at Smithson. "We didn't have anything else to say, did we, Smithson?"

Smithson shrugged. "I don't think so, sir."

"Good. We might as well go back, then."

Lowell greeted him as the jetsled rumbled into the center of the compound. "Did it all go well, sir?"

"Fine," Wharton said. "Have Bailey rig up the Deepsleep tank for me, eh? Lord, I can use some rest—haven't felt this tired in days."

"The Halivanu are leaving, then?"

"Leaving?" Wharton frowned. "Why should they be leaving? They've only begun their work."

"But—Colonel—"

"Yes, what is it?" Wharton snapped testily.

"You left an order—you said that at the end of four hours we should open fire on the Halivanu if they were still here."

Wharton frowned and started to walk on. "Must have been a mistake, Lowell. Order countermanded. *Bailey!* Bailey, get the tank ready!"

Lowell ducked around and put himself in front of the Colonel. "I'm sorry, sir. You told me to proceed on schedule even against your direct order."

"Nonsense!"

"There's a tape recording in your office—"

"I don't care. The Halivanu have permission to stay here. Let's have no talk of going against my direct orders, shall we?"

Mottled blotches appeared on Lowell's jowly face. "Colonel, I know this sounds strange, but you yourself insisted—"

"And I myself countermand the order! Do I have to make it any clearer, Captain? Please get out of my way. I say 'please' because you're an officer, but—"

Lowell stood his ground. Sweat rolled down his forehead. "The tape—"

"Will you give ground, Lowell?"

"No, sir. You definitely specified that I should not listen to any subsequent order countermanding your original one. And therefore—"

"Any commanding officer who gives a non-retractible order has to be out of his head," Wharton snapped. He signaled to two of the men nearby. "Place Captain Lowell in restrictive custody. I may be easy-going, but I won't tolerate insubordination."

Lowell, still protesting, was borne away. Wharton went on into his office. A tape was in the recorder. With a thoughtful frown he nudged the *playback* knob and listened.

"... I'm going to give the Halivanu four hours to get off this planet. At the end of four hours' time I want you to blast them with the heavy-cycle guns, even if I order you not to do it. Got that? Go against my direct order. ..."

Wharton's shaggy eyebrows lifted questioningly. Beyond a doubt it was his own voice. But why should he have said such a thing? The Halivanu had every right to be here. Why, right here on his desk was the authorization from Terra, allowing them to stop here for a while and make solar observations. The paper was right here—he fumbled through a pile of documents without coming across it. He shrugged. It had probably been misfiled. But he knew it was here, somewhere. He had seen it with his own eyes, after all.

What about the tape, then? Colonel Wharton shook his head and decided he must be getting old, to have ever given Lowell weird orders like that. Somewhere deep in his mind a silent

voice was lifted in inner protest, but the complaint, wordless, never reached conscious levels. Yawning wearily, Wharton flipped the *erase* knob on the tape recorder, waited until the message was completely obliterated, and ambled over to the infirmary for his ninety minutes of Deepsleep.

MIND FOR BUSINESS

Espionage and counter-espionage will probably remain with us, even into the era when Earthmen flit from solar system to solar system with blithe abandon. With a galaxy full of intelligent races, it's likely that the complex schemes of some future spy agencies will coil and tangle and become hopelessly snarled. Far across the universe, some Earthborn secret agent may be faced with a somber problem: how do you tell a genuine rescue party from an alien counterfeit?

Once it was clear to both of them that the little ship was permanently disabled, Connelly turned to the alien and grinned in open appreciation. "Very clever, you Nidlans. This is the neatest trap I've seen yet."

He stared at the screen, looking out at the bleak, wind-swept surface of the small, lonely planet, and then glanced back at the Nidlan. The alien was slouched comfortably in the far corner of the small cruiser, beaming with an inward glow of self-assurance.

"My people don't like it when Earthmen kidnap Chiefs of Staff," the Nidlan said. "They take steps."

Connelly nodded. "Very respectable steps, too. I was so busy hurrying away from Nidla with you that I let the trap take me. It must be a gigantic force field, set to draw in any ship that comes by without taking the right precautions. Eh?" He cocked an eye at the Nidlan. "What do you think, Lomor?"

"I have no opinion on the matter," the other said, shrugging. "All that concerns me is the fact that you've abducted me from my home world, and that I'll shortly be rescued." The Nidlan got up and crossed the cabin of the ship to the viewscreen, walking unsteadily. The ship had ploughed into the mountain-side at about a forty-five-degree angle, and the gyros had unaccountably stabilized things some ten degrees out of true, which made motion difficult. The alien peered pensively out at the unappetizing view.

"Nice," Connelly said.

"Very nice," said the alien smugly. "Your little experiment in espionage didn't seem to work very well, did it, Connelly?"

"Guess not," the Earthman replied laconically. "We're stuck here—both of us—half a light-year from the Nidla system."

"Yes," said the Nidlan. "My people will be here as soon as they discover the trap's been sprung. We've anticipated attempts by Earthmen to penetrate our defences, and we've studded the local area with these . . . ah . . . mousetraps. It's a fine counter-espionage system."

"Oh, yes," Connelly agreed. "A very fine system." He moved to the control board and started to press buttons. The Nidlan peered close, trying, without success, to read the unfamiliar Terran designations on the controls.

"What are you doing?" he asked finally.

"Shifting the guns around so they face front," Connelly explained. "By the time I get through, this place is going to be a fortress. With those rocks behind us and that plain out in front, you're not going to be as easy to rescue as you've been thinking, Lomor." He glanced meaningfully at the alien, who frowned.

"You Earthmen." Lomor said in annoyance. "Always making things so difficult."

Connelly smiled quietly to himself and went right on punching keys. Through the viewscreen the Nidlan saw the small but effective guns of the little cruiser rapidly lowering into the positions Connelly had set up.

The ship was backed up against a wall of stone, and armed to the teeth. The Nidlan shook his head petulantly. The Earthmen always seemed to have a trick or two left in the bag, at all times. That was how Connelly had been able to descend on Nidla in a one-man ship and blithely carry off so important a personage in the Nidlan military hierarchy as Lomor dal Govnim, and that was how Connelly had escaped from the Nidlan system so easily.

Now, true enough, Connelly was trapped—had been snared, through blind luck, by a cosmic mousetrap laid by Nidla. The traps could be avoided, as Lomor knew quite well. Only a blunder had gotten Connelly trapped, and it was refreshing to know that the Earthmen *could* blunder.

But they had an ugly way of turning their biggest blunders into their most impressive triumph. That was the trouble with them.

"Finished?" Lomor asked.

Connelly nodded. "I think so. When your rescuers come to fetch you, they'll have a fine fight on their hands." He ran a hand along the back of his neck. "How long did you say it would be before they'll notice the trap's been sprung?"

"Not very long," said Lomor coldly. The Nidlan was tense and abrupt; Connelly's bland confidence at all times—the very factor that had led Lomor to fall for him in the first place—was now almost unbearably annoying. Connelly had a terrifying air of serenity that made Lomor wonder whether letting the snare take him *had* been a blunder for the Earthman, or whether perhaps this was all a deliberate maneuver, part of some unknown larger plan.

"You think we've got a couple of days?" Connelly asked.

"I don't know," said Lomor.

Connelly grinned. "You're just not telling. But I don't mind. It's natural enough." He turned to the subradio and rapidly started setting up co-ordinates. After a moment or two, the machine began to glow and hum.

"Now what are you doing?" Lomor asked.

"I'm going to get us taken off this forsaken place," Connelly said. "By the *right* people."

The red light above the set indicated that the subradio was functioning. Connelly glanced up quickly to check it, grinned infuriatingly at the Nidlan, and cleared his throat.

Then he proceeded to dictate an S.O.S. on the widest beam that was open. He beamed to the whole universe the naked fact that he, Paul Connelly, Earthman, had been caught in a Nidlan trap on some uninhabited planet, that his ship had crashed and was useless, and that he was awaiting rescue.

He went on to add a detailed set of instructions for landing and blasting off from the planet without getting ensnared in the Nidlan trap.

Connelly repeated the message twice, then cut off the machine. He whirled on the swivel chair and met Lomor's horrified glare with a calm smile.

"How do you know how the trap operates?" Lomor demanded.

"You've just blundered, friend," Connelly told him coolly. "I might have been only bluffing with those instructions, and now you'd have confirmed my guess about the trap. Except," he

added, seeing the color rise on the Nidlan's face, "that I *did* know how your trap works. After all, I fell into it."

"Why? Deliberately?"

Connelly shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, no—not at all. But let's assume it was a blunder on my part. If it was, at least I've profited by my blunder to the extent of knowing how I got caught. Let's see you do likewise."

The Nidlan shook his head angrily, and repressed a biting comment. It didn't do any good to insult the Terrans; they just grinned.

"That S.O.S.," Lomor said, "did it go on wide-beam?"

"The widest there was," said Connelly. "*Someone's* bound to pick it up."

Someone did.

The Nidlans, being closest, caught it first. The message reached the office of Drilom dal Kroosh, Lomor's first assistant—and, in Lomor's unfortunate absence, the acting head of the office—just about the same time that the news of the trap-springing did.

Drilom looked up at the young officer who had brought him both dispatches.

"They both just came in, eh?"

"Both of them," the subaltern said. "One right after the other."

Drilom chewed a worn pencil-stub. "Hm-m-m. This Earthman Connelly is proving to be an intolerable nuisance. First he was crude enough to kidnap the Chief of Staff from under our noses, for who knows what purposes of his own, and now that we've caught him he's been so crass as to send out a wide-beam S.O.S. The whole galaxy will know about the Earth-Nidla friction at this rate."

"Yes, sir," the underling said.

Drilom glared at him. "Don't agree with me!"

"No, sir," said the subaltern helplessly.

Drilom ignored him. He stared down at the two dispatches for a long moment, toying with the gold braid on his uniform sleeves, while he groped for the snap decision his military culture required of him. Finally he looked up and snapped, "Get me Konno dal Progva."

"At once, sir."

Drilom's second-in-command arrived a moment later. Drilom hastily filled him in on the happenings.

"I see," Konno said sagely, when Drilom was through. Konno was a wiry, shriveled-up Nidlan with a much-respected talent for strategy. "The Earthman is holed up on our trap planet—presumably with Lomor in his custody."

"Right."

"And presumably, also, a ship from Earth has picked up the S.O.S. and is heading for the planet, there to rescue Connelly and gaily carry Lomor back to Earth—where they'll pick his brains thoroughly."

Drilom nodded grimly. "That's the picture," he said.

Konno wrinkled his sharp nose into a grimace of concentration. "If we send a Nidlan military expedition there to grab Connelly, we're liable to arrive at the same time the Earthmen do—which will touch off a quarrel and possibly catapult us into conflict with Earth before the schedule allows."

Sweat was pouring freely down Drilom's face. "I'm desperate, Konno. What am I supposed to do? If I pass the buck upstairs, it'll look bad for me, and—"

The other held up a hand. "Peace, Drilom. Look—suppose we send a decoy."

"Decoy?"

"Sure. Suppose we send a ship of Earth design—say, one of those small Terran merchant ships we trapped last month—manned by a crew of young men hand-picked for Terran appearance. Those Terran ships all look alike anyway." His beady eyes gleamed brightly. "Suppose we were to do that—pass ourselves off as merchantmen. If we got there before the Earth rescue party did, and if we could persuade Connelly that we were the true rescuers—"

Drilom dal Kroosh stared around the cabin of the stolen Earthship, transfixing first one, then another of his crew with angry, expressive glances. He hadn't expected, when he had broached the plan to his superiors, to be ordered to head the bogus rescue party himself.

But there hadn't been any way out of it, and so he had collected his crew—all strapping six-foot Nidlans, carefully chosen for the degree they approached the theoretical Terran norm of appearance—and had taken off for the little planet. He'd set up the nullifier patterns as instructed—the Earthman,

he admitted wryly, had hit on exactly the proper method of circumventing the trap and had explained it accurately enough in his S.O.S., for all to hear—and had landed.

The ship was now standing in the sandy plain that faced the vaulting pile of rocks amid which Connelly's ship had crashed. Drilom, staring into the screen, thought he could make out the dim, coppery gleam of the distant Terran ship, but he wasn't sure.

He turned to the chief radioman, a spare-limbed Nidlan named Pribor. "Make contact with Connelly," he ordered brusquely, and resumed his nervous pacing up and down the cabin.

While Pribor fiddled with the dials on the Earth-built radio, struggling manfully with the unfamiliar controls. Drilom turned to Huompor dal Vornik, the tall Nidlan standing at his side.

"I'm going to be down below watching from the monitor screen. If that Earthman ever got sight of me, he'd know the game in a minute. It's all in your hands now. And be careful; you know how important it is."

Huompor saluted smartly. "Yes, sir."

"Remember," Drilom said anxiously, "you're an Earthman. The reason you got here so fast is you're the captain of a merchant vessel that plies the neutral area. Say as little else as you can—and make it quick. Once we get Connelly and Lomor aboard we can drop the masquerade and head back to Nidla. Set?"

"Set, sir," Huompor replied.

"Ready to go, sir," called the radioman.

Drilom ducked down the hatch after scowling one last time at Huompor. He made his way to the monitor-screen on the lower level, and watched the whole thing from there.

He saw Connelly's face appear on the upstairs screen. The Earthman was young and mild-looking, with a lazy way about him of blinking his eyes that irritated Drilom considerably. Connelly didn't look clever enough to have caused all the difficulties he had. Drilom hoped he'd be unwary enough to fall for the Nidlan ruse. If Connelly somehow got back to Earth with Lomor, the consequences would be most unpleasant for Nidla's territorial ambitions.

Upstairs, Huompor dal Vornik stepped into the field of the screen and gave the standard Earthman salute.

"Lieutenant Connelly?"

"That's me," the Earthman agreed amiably.

"The name is Smith," Huompör said. "Captain of a merchantman in the vicinity."

"Oh?"

"We've intercepted your S.O.S.—we were in the neutral area on a trade run. Now, about this rescue," Huompör said, a little too eagerly.

"You're going to rescue me?" Connelly asked.

"Why else would we undertake this maneuver? Now—the most efficient way to carry it out would be for you to abandon your ship and be picked up at—"

Connelly raised one hand. "Skip the rest, friend. It doesn't appeal to me." the screen abruptly went blank.

And a moment later, a golden blast of energy from Connelly's starboard guns raked across Drilom's bow, missing the ship by a comfortable margin but making things so hot inside that the cooling system overloaded and nearly short-circuited.

"Definitely hostile," Drilom said morosely. His ship was now at a safer distance from Connelly's, and he was contemplating the situation with gloomy detachment.

"What could that shot have meant?" Huompör asked. "Perhaps it was some sign of friendship among Earthmen."

Drilom nearly choked. "That shot could mean only one thing, even among Earthmen, young man: *Get away, and stay away.* I don't know what you did wrong, but he saw right through your act. Two sentences out of your mouth and he knew you were a fake."

"I don't see how," said Huompör. "It was one of my best impersonations," he said wistfully.

"Doesn't matter," Drilom said. "Connelly didn't fall for it. And Lomör's still in there."

One of the other crew members appeared at that moment, saluted, and said, "Sir, another ship's just arrived!"

"Where?"

"It's approximately four hundred meters closer to Connelly than we are. We picked it up on the radar screen about ten minutes ago. It went through the same nullifier pattern we did, and it seems to be the identical model that we're using."

Drilom frowned, unamused by the irony of the situation. "Identical? That means it must be the *real* Earch rescue ship!" He held his head. "Now we're in for it, if they find out what

we're doing here. I hope this doesn't touch off the war ahead of time?"

"What do you suggest we do, sir?" Huompor asked.

"Just sit tight," said Drilom desperately. "Sit tight, and don't do anything. Come. Let's see what happens."

He walked to the nearest screen, and with trembling fingers brought it into focus.

The small, worthless sun that lit the nameless trap planet had long since set, but by the flickering green light of the planet's one moon Drilom could see the other ship. It was, indeed, identical—the very same model light cruiser that the Nid-lans had used. It was planted on end at the edge of the desert.

Drilom called down to his radio operator, "Tune in and find out if they're saying anything!"

A moment later, the signalman shouted in return, "They're a Terran merchant vessel! It's the real rescue party, all right!"

Drilom watched silently. He was waiting to see the figures of Connelly and Lomor leave the niche in the mountains and go to the Earth ship, and he wondered idly if there was any way of intercepting the pair as they crossed the desert. A minute passed, and suddenly the misty, moonlit plain was illuminated by a crimson flash of brightness.

"I'll be cursed," Drilom said in quiet wonderment. "He fired on them, too."

All kinds of possibilities presented themselves now—the possibility that Connelly was insane, the possibility that Lomor had somehow gained control of the damaged ship, the possibility, always to be considered, that Connelly and the Terran ship were playing out some elaborate ruse for Drilom's benefit.

In the midst of his feverish speculations, Pribor broke in. Drilom looked up sourly at his signalman.

"Well, what is it?"

"We've just had a call from the Terran ship, sir. Their commander would like to meet with you. He suggests that you and four of your men go outside, and he'll do the same; you can meet halfway between the two ships."

Drilom's forehead wrinkled as he considered the proposition. Earthmen were, by axiom, not to be trusted—but yet, the proposal seemed to be made in good faith. Perhaps, he thought, the Earthmen were so bewildered by Connelly's reaction that they were genuinely at a loss, and wanted to talk the thing over

with someone. Perhaps they thought Drilom's ship was from Earth; perhaps they knew the truth, and Drilom stood a chance of effecting a valuable compromise that would push him up a notch or two in the Nidlan hierarchy.

There was no way of telling. But it seemed safe to give it a try. "Tell him I accept," he said.

Later in the evening, Drilom and a small party suited up and made their way across the desert to the prearranged spot. They were armed to the teeth, with natural precaution.

The other delegation was there already. Drilom saw men much like himself, though they seemed to be bigger by a little, and behind them loomed a ship identical to his own.

The other commander was a deep-voiced man who introduced himself as Ledrash. Drilom could see nothing of him except dimly glimpsed craggy features within the helmet.

"He fired on you," Drilom said. "That's what he did to us. I can't understand it at all."

"Neither can we," said Ledrash. "Here we came all the way off our trade run to get him off this lump of rock, and look at the way he greets us! Where are you from?" Ledrash asked.

"Earth," Drilom lied.

"We're both from Earth, then," Ledrash said. The two commanders stared stonily at each other. Drilom began to suspect something. Connelly had fired on the second ship as well as his own. Could it be that Ledrash and his men were non-Earthmen too, carrying on the same sort of game for motives of their own? It was an idea, he admitted.

"It doesn't seem likely that Central would approve two rescue missions," Drilom ventured. "It seems to be a waste of crew time to send two ships to do a job that calls for one."

"I was just thinking along the same lines," Ledrash said ominously. "It's improbable that we're both from Earth."

"We came in good faith," Drilom said.

"So did we," said Ledrash. He crossed his thick-muscled arms, and Drilom caught the shadow of a somber smile behind his helmet. "One of us is lying."

Drilom looked uneasily at Ledrash's four men, and back at his own. It was an explosive situation, and he was navigating blindly, on sheer bluff. "If you're really Earthmen—" Drilom started to say, and then was interrupted. A member of Ledrash's crew who had been staring fixedly back of Drilom toward the mountains suddenly pointed up.

"Another ship, sir!" he shouted.

Ledrash whirled. "Where?"

The crewman gestured ineffectually. "There . . . there . . . just like ours," he said, struggling for words in his excitement. Finally he voiced what he was trying to say. "On the other side of the mountains—blasting off!"

Ledrash ran a few yards away for a better view, with Drilom right behind. The two commanders stared out blankly at the mountains, with the long, gradually dying scarlet trail of light hanging above the jagged peaks. A third ship had been there—and had left.

Ledrash turned slowly. "Get back to the ship and tell Dorni to try Connelly on the radio," he said. "On the double."

The signalman trotted off toward Ledrash's ship, while the little group remained frozen in the desert, waiting. A few minutes later the crewman returned. "There's no answer, sir. His radio's silent."

Ledrash sat down heavily on a wind-sculptured rock. "No answer?"

"No, sir."

Drilom moistened his dry lips. "He got away."

Ledrash nodded curtly. "Suppose we go over to my ship and talk this over," he suggested.

Drilom started to suggest his own ship as a preferable alternative, and stopped. There was nothing to fear from Ledrash. Drilom felt a curious feeling of camaraderie toward the other commander starting to grow within him. He had been flummoxed, all right—but so had Ledrash, and it made Drilom feel better to know he had company. The truth was clear, now: Ledrash was no more of an Earthman than he was. And while they held each other at arm's distance, the real Earthmen had come and gone.

They climbed the catwalk in silence and entered Ledrash's ship. It was, Drilom noted, the same model precisely as his own. They got out of their suits.

The other men, Drilom observed, were humanoids, and could pass for Earthmen or Nidlans easily. They were big, heavy-boned, dark-skinned.

Ledrash ran a hand through his hair. "We've been had," he said hoarsely. He smiled feebly at Drilom. "We've been taken—both of us."

"Let's check, first," Drilom insisted.

"How?"

"By going over to Connelly's ship," said Drilom.

Ledrash scowled, and finally pointed to two of his men. "Suit up, both of you. Take two of these"—indicating Drilom's men—"and get over there for a look-see."

Drilom nodded at two of his men. "Go with them," he ordered. "And make it fast."

An anxious few minutes passed, while the four crewmen jogged across the desert. Drilom lost sight of them as they entered the shadowy foothills of the mountains, and began to pick their way through the rocks to Connelly's ship.

Time passed, and the tension started to pull tight. Finally, after what seemed like hours, the men returned.

"Well?" Drilom demanded, knowing the answer. "Anything there?"

"Not a soul," said one of the men. "They left the air lock open. The ship's deserted."

"He got away, all right," said Ledrash.

"Both of them did," Drilom corrected.

"Both? I thought it was just the one Earthman."

"No," Drilom said. "Connelly had an influential Nidlan aboard as his prisoner."

"Oh." They grinned sheepishly at each other, each aware that he had made a blunder. Finally Drilom said, "You're not an Earthman, are you?"

Ledrash shook his head. "No use keeping up the pretense when the truth is obvious to both of us. I'm from Corilan. And I'll bet you're a Nidlan."

Drilom nodded. The two of them sat there in the Corilani ship, contemplating each other. It made sense, now. Corilar was a powerful planet located almost centrally between Earth and Nidla. Nidlan espionage had been aware for some time that the Corilani had formulated a series of actions which might conceivably rebound to the greater profit of Corilan, in the event of disagreements between the other two major powers of the galaxy.

So they had picked up Connelly's S.O.S., and the same plan had occurred to them as to the Nidlans. Fool Connelly, and spirit him off. Only it hadn't worked.

And his S.O.S. had also been picked up by real Earthmen.

"How come you came out there?" Drilom asked.

"We wanted the Earthman," said Ledrash. "And you?"

"The same."

"I won't probe any further," Ledrash said. "The situation's delicate enough as it is."

Drilom smiled at the big, square-hewn Corilano. "I'll say. When that Earthman gets back to his system with Lomor—with our Chief of Staff, that is—we won't have a military secret left worth hiding."

"How sad," the Corilano said. "How very sad for Nidla." He stood up and walked across the cabin. "We are aware that you plan a conflict with Earth. This will make it hard for you."

"Don't speak of it," Drilom said. "Let's keep *some* secrets from each other, shall we? Our planets are theoretically rivals, you know."

"What does that matter to us?" said Ledrash. He turned and faced the Nidlan squarely. "We are both human beings," he said with obvious feeling. "We have something in common that binds us together—we have both been badly fooled by the Earthmen."

"True enough," Drilom said. He smiled and extended a hand. "Comrades in adversity," he said.

They fell silent for a while, as the sun began to rise. It was an unimpressive sunrise: the star that lit the trap planet was scrawny and definitely third-rate, and it cast a sickly, yellowish morning glow. Drilom suddenly realized that he had been up all night, and that he was terribly tired.

"Let's go back to my ship for a while," Drilom suggested.

The Corilano commander nodded. "Good idea."

They covered the sands in silence for a while, and then Drilom said, "It's very strange, you know."

"What is?"

"Look: you and I came down separately, in identical ships, and went through the same nullifying pattern to avoid a trap. And he fired on both of us almost at once."

"While the true Earthmen," Ledrash said, "did exactly the things we did, in the very same sort of ship, looking exactly the way we do—and Connelly went with them."

"It doesn't figure," said Drilom worriedly, as they approached the catwalk of his ship. "The three ships went through identical patterns of action. Only the motives were

different, not the patterns we produced. He had no way of telling that. And yet he knew the real rescuer from the phonies."

"And yet he knew," the Corilano repeated. "How?"

Drilom hoisted himself into the air lock, and Ledrash followed. They stripped off their suits and Drilom took a bottle from a cabinet. He poured drinks for both of them.

"This is why I suggested we came over," he said. "We need these."

As he raised the drink to his lips, Drilom heard the excited rapping of Signalman Pribor. "Come on in," he said.

Pribor burst into the room, recoiled at the sight of the burly Corilano sprawled out in a chair, and at Drilom's impatient gesture said, "I've just been checking the tapes on the monitor pickup, sir. And it seems we've recorded the conversation that took place between the third ship and Connelly."

Drilom darted a glance at Ledrash and snapped. "Play it at once!"

Pribor inserted the tape in a playback and waited. In a moment, the warning hum appeared, and then voices.

"Connelly?" said the voice of the Earthship's commander.

"That's right," they heard Connelly's familiar voice say.

"The name is Danvers. Captain, Merchant Service. We were over at Mokrin on our regular run when we got your message. Right now we're just outside landing range of this trap planet you're on. Want us to come down?"

"Sure do," said Connelly. "I'd like to get going."

There was a long pause. Then, finally, Captain Danvers said, "Couple of details first, Connelly."

"Shoot."

"This little jaunt is costing us good money. What's the chance of salvaging your ship?"

"The ship's pretty battered," Connelly said.

"Um-m-m. Maybe we'd better call the Patrol, instead, then. Unless you're sure your department can handle the charge on this thing. Our budget can't take much more fuel expenditure."

"Don't worry," Connelly said at once. "It'll be on 'Deep Info'—You'll come out ahead."

"Good enough," said the merchantman captain. "We'll be right down."

"Glad to hear it," Connelly said. "And glad to hear the voice of a genuine Earthman again—the kind that knows how to haggle!"

Drilom pounced on the playback and shut it off angrily. "There's our mistake," he snapped.

"Where?"

"Attitudes. We had the external pattern down fine—but not the way of thinking. That's why he saw through us. We went about negotiations the way soldiers would, brisk, efficient, to the point. A *real* merchantman would bargain. He wouldn't want to get mixed up in this except for a price."

Ledrash nodded bleakly. "What are you going to do?"

"Go back home and file a report," Drilom said in a hollow voice. "We're not ready to start trouble with these Terrans—not ready at all."

"You'll have to learn some of their tricks first," Ledrash suggested sardonically. "*Then* fight them."

Drilom shook his head. "No," he said. "It won't work. By that time, they'll have half a dozen new ones. We'll never beat them that way." He smiled suddenly. "But maybe—some day—we'll be smart enough not to *need* to beat them!"

MISFIT

An earlier story in this book considered the problem of how men will colonize planets where they are physically unfit to cope with other-worldly living conditions. One possible suggestion was that it may be necessary to adapt humans to fit the new worlds.

Take that suggestion a step further, now. In the far future, the worlds of space are populated by adapted Earthmen—and what will become of an unadapted man, our sort of man, when he finds himself on a world where he does not belong?

Foss stood outside the Colony Officer's shack, feeling the tremendous drag of the alien world's gravity tugging at his bones. He tried to keep himself from slouching, but it was hard. On an Earth-type world, his lean body carried 170 pounds; here on Sandoval IX he weighed 306. That sort of drag could do things to a man's insides fast.

A little knot of Adapted Men clustered across the wide street, grinning mockingly at him. Low-slung, broad-beamed, they weren't bothered by the 1.8 grav of Sandoval IX. They had been bred for it; they thrived here. And they were openly enjoying Foss's discomfort.

He knocked again.

Nothing but silence followed. Foss turned away from the door and glared at the watching Adaptos. "Hey—you! Where's Haldane? I want to see him."

After a pause one of them said lazily, "He's in there, Earthman. Just keep knockin'. He'll hear you sooner or later, I guess." He burst into uproarious laughter. Angrily, Foss pounded on the Colony Officer's door with both fists. Lifting his arms was agonizing; it was like raising them through a fog of molasses.

This time the door opened. Colony Officer Haldane appeared, a dark scowl on his wide leathery face. Like all of the Adapted Men on Sandoval IX, Haldane was short—no more than five-four or so—with tremendous girth through the shoulders and hips. His neck was a thick pillar; his thighs must

have been immense. His type had been genetically engineered for worlds like Sandival IX.

"Yes?" he asked, in a deep, rumbling voice. "You new here, Earthman? Don't remember seeing your face around here before."

"I just got here," Foss said. He pointed to the field behind him, where the slim golden column of his two-man ship rested. "Came in from Egri V. I'm looking for someone here. Maybe you can help me."

"That's doubtful. We don't run a lost-and-found for Earthmen here, you know."

Foss felt sweat rolling down his face. Sandoval IX was a hot world as well as a heavy one.

"All I want is some information," he said tightly. "Just information. I'm not asking for any help."

The Adapted Man shrugged easily. "You wouldn't *get* any help, whether you asked for it or not. *Earthman*."

"I said I wouldn't ask," Foss snapped.

"Okay. Come on inside and I'll hear you out, I guess."

There was a woman inside., immensely broad through the hips, big-breasted and flat-faced. To Foss she was repugnant-looking, but Adapted Men had different standards of beauty. She was ideally designed for child-bearing on a heavy-gravity planet, and, judging from the two stocky children playing on the floor, she had already made a good start.

"My wife," Haldane grunted as he led Foss past. "And my children."

Foss smiled mechanically and kept going. They turned into a small, shabby room that was probably the Adapted Man's study. Haldane dropped ponderously into a vast pneumochair and didn't bother to gesture to Foss to sit. Foss sat anyway, in a smaller chair that looked sturdy enough to hold an elephant. He took a sharp breath as the gravity-strain on his heart was suddenly eased.

"What's your name and what do you want here?" Haldane asked.

"My name is Web Foss. I'm an Earthman attached to the Civil Government on Egri V. Two weeks ago my wife . . . ran away. She came here. I want to bring her back."

"How do you know she came here?"

"I know. Don't worry about that. I thought you might be able to help me find here."

"Me?" Haldane asked with jeering mock-innocence. "I'm just a mere local official. She might be anywhere at all on Sandoval IX. There are more than twenty colonies on this planet, you know."

"Twenty's not very many," Foss said. "I'll search them all if I have to."

A smile creased Haldane's bleak face. With elaborate lack of courtesy he drew a bottle from his desk, poured himself a drink, and replaced the bottle without offering it to Foss. He sipped slowly, ignoring the Earthman. At length he said, "You know, Mr. Foss, Earthmen aren't very popular on the Adapted Worlds. We don't get very good treatment when we visit the—ah—Normal Worlds. Cheap hotels, second-rate transportation, sly snickers, that sort of thing. 'Look at the Adapted Man—isn't he funny?' You know what I'm talking about?"

"I know. I can't help what ignorant people say or do. They don't understand that the Adapted Men are just as human as anyone else, that without them many planets couldn't have been settled. But—"

"Spare me the sermon," Haldane said. "The fact still remains that we were bred from Earth stock and now get treated as something not quite human. Dammit, we *are* human—and better than damned soft Earthmen who'd be dead in a year on a planet like this!"

"It's not a matter of better or worse," Foss said. "On a heavy-grav planet like this, you're better suited than we are. After all, you've been Adapted for it. On an Earth-norm world, it's the other way around. It's all relative. But my wife—"

"Your wife's here. She's not in this particular colony, but she's on Sandoval IX."

"Where?"

"That's your problem. Mr. Foss."

Foss rose, fighting the gravity every inch of the way. "You know where she is. Why won't you tell me?"

"You're an Earthman," Haldane said quietly. "A superior being. Go find her by yourself."

Without a word, Foss turned and left the Colony Officer's study, made his way through the dark cluttered hallway, past the children and their mother, out into the street. He kept stiffly erect, resisting the temptation to shuffle. That would be simpler, easier on his straining thigh-muscles, but he forced

himself to walk springingly as if the gravity was Earth-norm instead of 1.8.

He hadn't expected much better treatment from Haldane. It was rare for an Adapted Man to even the score with an Earthman; usually it was a confused and bewildered Adapto on an Earth-norm world who met only laughter as he struggled to cope with a light grav pull or with an atmosphere so rich in oxygen that it left him half-drunk. Some of the Adaptos were bred to survive in an atmosphere only eight or ten per cent oxygen; when they hit the 20 per cent of an Earth-norm world, they spent their time on a continuous oxygen jag.

The shoe was on the other foot now, and the Adaptos enjoyed the feeling. An Earthman had ventured into an Adapted World, reversing the usual pattern. They weren't going to go out of their way to make things easy for him.

But Carol was here . . . somewhere. He'd find her.

Somehow.

He stepped out into the street. The little cluster of Adaptos was still there. Foss crossed the street and headed toward them.

The group broke up as he got there. They melted away in six directions, as if they didn't want anything to do with the lean, hard-faced Earthman.

"Hold it," Foss said. "I want to talk to you."

They kept moving, strolling casually away.

"Hold it!"

He sprang forward and grabbed an Adapto by his open collar. He was almost a foot taller than the man. "I asked you to wait a minute. I want to talk to you."

"Let go of me, Earthman."

"I said I wanted to talk to you."

The Adapto jerked himself out of Foss's grasp and hit him. Foss saw the punch coming, lifting from the hip and heading for his jaw, but there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. His gravity-prisoned body simply would not react as it had been trained to do. He made a single ineffectual attempt at ducking, and then the Adapto's fist cracked into the side of his face.

He hit the ground with astonishing speed. Crack—boom! He had gone over like a skulled tenpin. After a moment he felt his jaw tentatively; it still seemed to be in one piece. He realized the Adapto had merely tapped him; an unpulled punch would probably have been fatal.

Foss got up, slowly. The Adapto stood his ground, legs spread belligerently.

"Want another?"

"One's enough," Foss said. His jaw felt numb. "I just wanted to ask you something."

The Adapto sauntered away, down the wide empty street. Foss watched him go. It had been a mistake to attempt the use of force; even the weakest of these colonists could flatten him with a slap, and Foss was no weakling himself.

This wasn't his world, though. It belonged to the Adaptos, and he was a misfit here—a man for whom walking and breathing were constant problems, not second nature. He looked up at the warm blueness of distant Sandoval, and scowled. It was hard to blame the Adaptos.

The offspring of men, they were objects of ridicule when they went among the so-called Normals. They were simply getting even, now.

He balled his fists angrily. *I'll show them*, he thought. *I'll find Carol—without their help.*

He took a couple of steps down the broad street, knowing that if he stood still long enough his muscles would tighten and become useless.

The settlement had a rough, half-finished look. It was only three generations since the Adapted Man program had got under way, and Sandoval IX had been settled less than a decade before by a pilot group tailored to withstand its heat, humidity, atmospheric makeup, and gravity. There were perhaps ten thousand Adaptos here now, in twenty colonies scattered over the planet's face. In time they would spread and populate the entire world. In time.

And a few centuries hence mankind would spread from one end of the galaxy to the other—with even the most forbidding world inhabited by beings that could be called human.

Foss took a heavy step. He was thinking of Carol—of Carol, and of that last quarrel back on Egri V. He hardly remembered how it had started, by now—but he would never forget how it had finished.

Would never forget the bright anger in Carol's eyes as she said, "I've had enough, Web. Of you and of this planet. I'm leaving tonight."

He hadn't believed her. Not until he discovered she'd withdrawn half of their joint savings account and vanished. There

weren't any scheduled flights out of Egri V for three weeks, and for a while he had hoped she was still somewhere on the planet.

Until he found out she'd hired a private courier to drop her off at his next port of call. Foss had spoken to the courier.

"You took her to Sandoval IX?"

"That's right."

"But that's an Adapted World. She couldn't last long there!"

The courier shrugged. "She wanted to get off Egri V in a hurry. I told her where I was going, and she paid me. No questions asked. I dropped her off there on my supply route last week."

"Okay," Foss had said. "Thanks."

And then he had borrowed the two-man ship from the Ministry, and gone after her. Carol wasn't the pioneer type; she wouldn't have gone to Sandoval IX if she knew what sort of world it was. It had been a wild, desperate move, and one she no doubt regretted by this time.

He reached a street corner and paused. The blocky figure of an Adapto was coming toward him.

"You the Earthman who's looking for his woman?"

"That's right," Foss said.

"She's in the next settlement. Ten miles west of here, roughly. I saw her last time I made a trip over that way, four-five days ago."

Foss blinked in surprise. "You're telling me the truth, aren't you?"

The Adapto spat. "I wouldn't lie to an Earthman."

"How come you're telling me? I thought none of you meant to help me at all."

The Adapto's deep-set black eyes met his. Slowly he said, "We were just talkin' about it. We figure it's simpler to tell you where she is. That way you won't be mousin' around here botherin' us all the time. Go after your woman, friend. We don't want you here. An Earthman smells up the air. He louses up the crops."

Foss licked his lips tensely holding back his temper. "Okay," he said. "I won't inflict my presence on you any more than I have to. Ten miles west, you say?"

"Yeah."

"I'm on my way," Foss said. He thought for a moment: there wasn't much fuel left in the two-man ship, and a heavy

world like Sandoval IX had a high escape velocity. He could get to the next settlement by blasting off, orbiting, and making a new landing ten miles westward, but that would consume a tremendous amount of reaction mass; quite probably he wouldn't be able to make a second blastoff later, after he'd found Carol. He would have to leave the ship here, and find some other way of covering ten miles.

He pulled out his wallet. "I'd like to rent a landcar from you, if you've got one. I won't need it more than an hour or so. Is it worth ten credits to you?"

"No."

Foss cursed silently. "Fifteen?"

"Save your breath, friend. My car isn't for rent at any price."

"A hundred," Foss said desperately.

"I said save your breath."

"If you won't rent me a car, someone else will." He stepped around the Adapto and headed down the street, moving as fast as was possible.

"You can save your energy too," the Adapto called after him. "You'll need it for the hike."

"Huh?"

He turned. The Adapto was smiling scornfully at him. "Nobody's going to rent you a car, friend. Fuel's too precious here to waste on you. It's only ten miles. Let's see you walk it, Earthman."

Only ten miles. Let's see you walk it.

Foss heard the words over and over again. He entered a bar further down the street. Ten or twelve Adaptos were there, drinking. They looked up coldly as he came through the photon-barrier.

"We don't serve Earthmen here," the bartender said. "This is a restricted bar. Locals only."

Foss glowered at him. "I didn't come in here to drink." He looked around. "I want to rent a landcar," he said loudly. "My wife's in the next settlement. I want to go get her. Who'll rent me his car for an hour?"

No response. Foss drew a hundred-credit bill from his wallet. "I'll put a hundred credits on the line for somebody's car. Any takers?"

The bartender said, "This is a drinkin' place, Earthman, not

a public square. You want to transact business, transact it outside."

Foss ignored that. "Well? A hundred credits?"

Someone at the bar chuckled. "Put your money away. Earthman. We're not goin' to rent you anything. It's only ten miles. Start walking."

Foss was silent a moment. *Only ten miles.* For an Adapto, that was an afternoon's invigorating hike. For an Earthman, it meant a day or more of weary leg-dragging. They were daring him to do it. They wanted to see him die trying.

Well, he wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

"Okay," he said softly. "I'm going to walk there, and I'm going to walk back. And tomorrow I'll be back here to show you that an Earthman can do it."

They turned away. No one was looking at him.

"I'll be back," Foss said.

He left the bar and headed across the field toward his ship. His muscles ached; his heart was throbbing wearily from the exertion needed to pump almost twice as hard. Earth-norm people weren't meant for Sandoval IX. A few weeks or maybe a month or two in this kind of grave and the tired heart would give out completely.

His throat was dry and his eyes were tearing by the time he reached the cabin of the ship. He assembled a lightweight survival kit—compass, drinkflask, food tabs, saline drops, other essentials. He strapped the pack to his back. It was a five-pound kit, the sort of burden a man would hardly notice ordinarily. Here it weighed nine pounds, and Foss knew it would seem a lot heavier than that before he was through walking.

He stopped for a moment to rest in the acceleration cradle. Then, relentlessly, he dragged himself to his feet and clambered down out of the ship, taking every step of the catwalk carefully instead of jumping as he usually did. A jump here might snap his ankles.

The afternoon sun was high overhead. *Ten miles*, he thought. How long would it take to walk ten miles? It was 1300 now; if he covered only two miles an hour, he'd be there before nightfall.

A watching group of Adaptos called something to him as he started out. He couldn't hear what it was, but he was willing to bet it wasn't any sort of encouragement.

The land spread out broad and flat before him as he walked; it was good farm-land, rolling and brown, sun-warmed, fertile. Far off in the distance rugged steep hills, not quite steep enough to be mountains, formed a backdrop. The air was warm. A brown dirt road wound through the farmland, leading on to the next settlement, where Carol was.

It was lovely country. It was too good a world to allow it to go to waste, which was why men had been Adapted to live on it. But Foss did not belong in the landscape scene, and he knew it.

He pulled himself along. Muscles designed to support a man of 170 pounds groaned under the burden of 306; ligaments complained. He felt mountainous, gross, impossibly heavy and impossibly weak. Torrents of sweat drenched his body.

After a while he stopped and cut a walking-stick from a tree at the side of the road. Pulling the living limbs from the tree required fearful effort; he was gasping and wheezing by the time he had done it. He moved on, shoving himself forward with jabs of the stick.

He had covered two and a half miles by the end of the first hour. That was little better than schedule, but the effort left him limp. He didn't do quite so well during the second hour; the pedometer he was carrying showed that he was now only four miles out, plus two hundred yards. His pace was slackening.

Six miles to go—

He shambled on mechanically, not worrying now about his posture, not worrying about anything but the sheer one-foot-after-another plodding that would bring him to his goal.

Every step will bring me nearer, he thought. He made a little chant of it: *EVry STEP will BRING me NEARer*, taking a step forward on each accented syllable. *EVry STEP will BRING me NEARer*, over and over, until it began to drag out . . . *EVry . . . STEP will . . . BRING me . . . NEARer*, with longer and longer intervals between the beat.

Finally he sank into a little heap on the side of the road and rested. His breath came short. His heart thudded so hard that he shook with each pulsation. Then he thought of the mocking Adaptos waiting somewhere behind him—possibly trailing him, waiting for the moment he dropped of exhaustion. He levered up off his walking stick and kept going.

What's 1.8 grav? he asked himself. Hell, I stand up to five and six grav all the time in a spaceship.

Yeah. For ten seconds at a time, he answered himself.

He checked his watch, then the pedometer. The digits swam. He was now three and a half hours out of the colony, and had covered a little better than five miles. He was falling further and further behind schedule.

EVry . . . STEP will . . . BRING me . . . NEARer. . .

He dragged his left leg forward, planted it on the ground, swung the right one up past it, then the left, the right. . .

He lost track of the time, of the distance, of everything. He looked at the dial every now and then, but it made no sense. From time to time, when he remembered about it, he took a tablet from his kit and swallowed it. That gave him the energy to go on a little further, and yet a little further.

The sky darkened as the sun dropped out of sight. The warmth of the day trickled off into space. Foss kept moving. *Only ten miles. Let's see you walk it.*

Houses came into sight. Streets. People.

No, not people. Adaptos, short, squat, grotesque. Foss found himself looking down at a leathery brown face. He leaned forward on the walking-stick, trying to catch his breath.

"I'm Web Foss," he said. "I'm looking for an Earthwoman. Mrs. Carol Foss. Is she here?"

For one wild dizzy moment he thought the Adapto might sneer and tell him that he'd simply traveled in a wide circle, that he was back in the same settlement from which he'd started out so long ago.

The Adapto nodded gravely. "The Earthwoman is here, with us. I'll take you to see her."

"You're not joking, now. She's really here?"

"Of course," the Adapto said impatiently. Foss noticed him staring strangely at him. "Where's your ship?" he asked.

"Ten miles the other way. I walked here."

"You—walked?" the Adapto said.

Foss nodded. "Take me to my wife, will you?" The fatigue of the trip seemed to wash away. For the first time in hours, he stood up straight.

They had put Carol in a dark back room of one of the settlement houses. As Foss entered, he saw her lying asleep on a crude pallet. The room was windowless; the air was stale and

offensive. Three empty bottles of liquor lay on their sides near the bed: two gin, one some local brew. The room looked dismal.

He approached the bed and looked at his wife.

The gravitational pull did strange things to her face; it tightened the jaw muscles, made the lips rubbery and drooping, imparted an idiot sag to the eyelids. She looked as if she had lost twenty pounds; her face was harshly angular and almost skull-like.

"My God," he said out loud. "It that what a human being looks like after two weeks here?"

She stirred. Foss turned and saw two Adaptos standing curiously behind him.

"Get out of here," he said. "Leave us alone."

"Web," she murmured. "Web. . . ."

She hadn't opened her eyes yet.

Foss leaned close over her and with trembling fingers touched her cheek. The skin was dry and flakey. "Wake up, Carol. Wake up."

She opened her eyes hesitantly—then, seeing him, sat half-upright in bed, sinking back again after a moment. "Web," she said.

"I got here this morning. The courier told me where you had been dropped off, and I figured I'd better come get you. This isn't the sort of world you would be likely to enjoy on a permanent basis."

She sat up again, with a resolute effort. "It's been hell. As soon as I felt the grav I knew I couldn't stay here . . . but that courier was gone, and there was no way I could get in touch. And the Adaptos weren't very helpful."

"At least they gave you a place to stay. I didn't even rate that."

"It was like a nightmare—trying to walk against that gravity." She shuddered. "I couldn't go more than ten or twenty steps without falling down. And the Adaptos—they just stood around and laughed, for the first couple of hours. Then I collapsed, and after that they were a little more decent. I had a little money; they brought me liquor, and I drank . . . it was the only way I could . . . could stop feeling the drag this place has!"

Foss held her wrist. It was almost cold.

"I guess I've been here a week or two," she went on. "I sleep

most of the time. they feed me, a little. They treat me the way they would some animal that was sick. Web?"

"Eh?"

"Web, can we go home? Both of us?"

"That's why I came here, Carol."

She shook her head. "I was an idiot . . . running away like that, coming here. But I got my reward, I guess."

"We'll leave tomorrow," he said. "I have a ship." *Ten miles away*, he added silently.

She was staring at him. "Look at yourself in the mirror," she said suddenly. "Over there."

Foss rose, crossed the room, looked at his image. Even in the dim light, the sight rocked him. The face was that of a skeleton—a stubble-bearded skeleton with staring eyes, pale, gaunt cheeks, bloodless lips. That ten-mile trip had left its mark. He looked like his own ghost.

He managed to chuckle. "Pretty awful, isn't it? You're no better. But we can fatten up again when we're back on Egri V."

"Come here. Sit down next to me."

He cautiously lowered himself to the edge of the bed. He wriggled out of his kit-pack and stretched out next to her, feeling sick with fatigue. Seconds later, he was asleep.

Only ten miles. Let's see you walk it.

Ten miles there, ten miles back. And for the second ten-mile hitch he not only had to drag his own feet along, he had to support Carol.

The sun was blazingly warm when they set out, and grew warmer through the day. They talked incessantly, desperately, turning themselves into automata that marched on, on, without paying attention to the passing of the hours or the extent of road still ahead.

"We're lucky," Foss said after a while. "I put the ship down any old place. I could have landed it twenty miles away. Or two hundred. It's only ten."

"*Only ten*," Carol said.

"Only ten."

They rested frequently. Foss found himself growing oddly stronger as the day went on, as if his body were adjusting—*adapting*—itself to the increased pull of gravity, getting used to the drag exerted on it. He knew that was just illusion, of

course; still, it was less of an effort than it had been on the way out.

The sun blazed down. Somewhere ahead was the colony, and in the colony was Foss's ship.

Somewhere.

It was still daytime when they got there.

A welcoming committee of Adapted Men stood by the road as they came by. "Walk straight," Foss whispered. "Don't slouch. Pretend you were just out for an afternoon's stroll, nothing more."

"I'll try. It's hard, though."

"You have to do it. Just for a few minutes—until we reach the ship."

He recognized a few faces. There was Colony Officer Haldane and his wife, and there the man who had knocked him down, and there some of the other jeerers. They were staring wordlessly at him.

"I came back," Foss said, when he was within speaking distance. "And I brought my wife."

"So I see," Haldane said coldly.

"I just thought I'd let you know I made it. I didn't want it to worry you."

"We weren't worried," Haldane said. "We didn't care."

But it was a lie. Foss knew. He could tell by the way their dark faces were scowling and their eyes glared that they *did* care.

They had sent the misfit out into the desert to die, but he had come back alive. He had beaten them. One single Earthman.

"Excuse me," Foss said. "You're in my way. I want to get back to my ship."

But three of the Adaptos stood blocking the road, staring at him. He felt Carol's hand grip his arm more tightly. *No more trouble now*, he prayed.

Not now.

"Get out of my way," Foss said sharply. "Let me get past."

There was a moment of silence. Then Haldane said, "Get out of his way."

Sullenly, the three Adaptos gave way. Foss and Carol went past, on their way to the ship. He felt very tired, but he knew now there wouldn't be any further trouble.

He walked on about twenty paces. Then he stopped and looked back. They were all staring after him.

"Thanks for everything," he said, smiling. "All the kind help. But I managed without you, didn't I?"

His eyes met Haldane's—and Haldane looked away. That was what Foss had been waiting for. An Earthman had met an Adapto on the Adapto's home grounds, and the Earthman had won. Foss could see that in Haldane's eyes.

He boosted Carol up into the ship, and followed her in. Just before he slammed the hatch shut, he peered out at the group of Adaptos outside. They were staring at him incredulously, as if they couldn't believe he had actually returned alive.

He grinned at them. The next time an Earthman came here, they'd have a little more respect for him.

"So long," he yelled. Then he slammed the hatch, dogged it shut, and went inside to begin setting up the homeward orbit.

Robert Silverberg—Bob, to his science fiction fans around the world—lives in New York City with his equally talented, and beautiful, wife (an electronics engineer) and a currently undetermined number of cats. All share a large old house.

His science fiction writing includes over twenty books, among them *Revolt on Alpha C*, *Lost Race of Mars*, *Starman's Quest*, *Collision Course*, as well as over a thousand short stories and novelettes.

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"If there is one thing I like to do, it is to beam condescendingly down upon bright young authors who enter my field; that is, science fiction. There is something delightful about unbending from my awesome height as established master in the genre (I am Isaac Asimov, by the way, if you haven't already guessed) to encourage some eager young person who has set his shaky foot upon the path I have myself trod so sure-footedly and so far.

I was all set to do this to young Robert Silverberg when he began to publish science fiction stories in the middle 1950's. I prepared my little speech, one that was not too awe-inspiring, of course, but yet with just a touch of necessary dignity, and was set.

And then what do you suppose the miserable ungrateful creature went and did? He zoomed upward at rocket velocities!

I was just bending down to pat him on the head when he whizzed by and nearly took the skin off my nose. When I leaned back and looked upward, there was Robert Silverberg — a first-magnitude star in the science fiction heavens. He went from mere fan to big-time writer in exactly zero time."

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